Escape from Nihilism
Rediscovering our place in late modernity

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Part I. Introduction of the Problem We Face

In this project, we wish to show how many today are captured by an ideology of which they may not even be aware. It is mixed in with how they see the world, how they choose and perceive reality. We will try to decipher the code of Nihilism, expose it to scrutiny and show its hold on us. Also we attempt to show a way out by employing a bigger perspective, a different plausibility structure, a way of seeing ourselves and the world with fresh eyes. This is a trajectory of sustainable meaning and hope for humanity. In one sense, this is a liberation project for late moderns and their identity. They are unknowingly trapped (held captive) within their own discourse. It follows a quest to discover the more that whispers into our imaginative ear, even while we have not yet articulated it.

The reader will quickly see that Charles Taylor is a key thinker assisting us in our journey through late modernity. It involves a process of understanding our location within Western culture, with the various views on secularity, some of which are quite dysfunctional, inadequate or even harmful. At the end of the day, we are trying to rethink who we are. We are claiming that Nihilism does not have the last word and that although we are located here, we are not intellectually trapped within an immanent frame. What follows is a deep structure protest that there is so much more to be said, explored, researched and discovered. It is also an archival rediscovery or retrieval of lost insights and language such as the good. We explore a deeper meaning in our very humanity within the hopeful perspective of incarnational humanism. What follows involves a decade or more of thinking, research and dialogue within academia. We hope you the reader will benefit greatly from this discussion.

Charles Taylor’s book A Secular Age is a major contribution to the analysis of our philosophical and cultural climate in the West. He traces how we moved from theism through deism to atheism over 500 years (roughly 1500 to 2000 C.E.). The Templeton prize-winning tome explores how we can reframe the current dialogue and debate about our identity and our ‘secularity’. In one sense, he is showing us how not to be secular. Who indeed are we late moderns? What are the possibilities for dialogue between people of such divergent philosophical and ethical positions? How can we live and work together in a positive way? Are there trends to highlight? What are the poetic and prophetic connectors, the interpretive keys to unlock the mystery of our age, and broaden the horizon of the contemporary spiritual and cultural imagination? To accomplish this, we must seek to recover aspects of language itself as part of the quest. Taylor played a
strong role in my PhD dissertation on the current crisis of the self. It was actually a dialogue with, and critique of, Michel Foucault’s concept of moral self-constitution, with links to freedom and the good. This ten part series of thoughts capture some of the critical insights inspired by Charles Taylor and other great minds. He happens to be one of the top twelve living philosophers according to many of his peers, the preeminent Canadian philosopher in the political, cultural and moral realm. We might well call him the premier philosopher of Western modernity. Taylor’s thought is the backbone of this critique.

Our language has lost, and needs to have restored, its constitutive power claims Taylor. This means that we can deal instrumentally with realities around us but their deeper meaning (the background in which they exist) the higher reality which finds expression in them, is ignored and often invisible to us. Our language has lost the power to Name things in their embedding, their deeper, richer and higher reality. The current incapacity of language is a crucial factor in our incapacity of seeing well and flourishing. Our language, our vision and our lives often remain flattened in late modernity. The discussion that follows is an attempt to recover the richness of language and also its larger horizon of meaning.

In A Secular Age (2007) and his previous discussion on ethical culture (philosophical anthropology), Sources of the Self (1989), Taylor offers a deep reflection on the history and current state of modernity in the West. He documents a major change in the social imaginary, or interpretive background, the way things seem or make sense to us. One might also call this the conditions of plausibility. It is a shift in ethos and includes people’s basic sensibilities, their assumptions and perceptions about the way things really are. It will emerge that plausibility structure is a key concern in this discernment exercise. He speaks about our need to learn from our historical roots: “Our past is sedimented in our present and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves as long as we cannot do justice to where we came from.” (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 29). This could also be called a history of the present state. Our philosophical narrative is vital to self-understanding.

Contrary to many, Taylor has noted that human flourishing has become the main focus of life in a period of unbelief in the transcendent or the divine. We have moved from a transcendent to an immanent worldview since medieval times. In the West, God was once the ultimate good for the majority of citizens, and now human flourishing is the ultimate good within what he calls an “immanent frame” or personal horizon. Every person and every society inescapably lives by some conception of human flourishing (fulfilled life, one worth living, one which we naturally admire). It is often inscribed in ancient moral codes, philosophical theories, or religious practices and devotion. So the definition of human flourishing is another interpretive key in our quest. Watch for it in the discussion that follows.

Contrary to many, Taylor does not believe in the demise of religion in our post-secular age, but instead claims that we are in pursuit of more, rather than less, spirituality today. This reveals what he calls the “Nova Effect” of multiple spiritual journeys or quests for meaning. We have not given up on spirituality and meaning; late moderns are looking for it everywhere; they are bent on making sense of their existence. He also speaks of
multiple modernities, because we actually experience modernity differently in different contexts. We are cross-pressured. Perhaps this is why some authors also speak of multiple selves. Late moderns are definitely on a searching journey and no one is quite sure where it will end. Perhaps the very popular academy award winning film “Life of Pi” is a sampler of the complexity of the journey he describes. The main character explores several religious and secular (meaning) views to make sense of his adventure; there are many tensions between them. There must be cultural resonance with the ambivalence in the story to give it such cult status.

The three major forms of spirituality or ‘hypergood’ today are entailed in: exclusive (scientific) humanism, also received as scientism; Christian or theistic humanism; and neo-Nietzschean anti-humanism with its emphasis on exploring the Dionysian appetites whatever they might be, including a philosophy of cruelty and sadism. Early modern history scholar Brad Gregory (2012) adds a fourth (extreme view) with avant-garde trans-humanism. These people want to remake the human, or invent the human through various forms of manipulations (genetic, technological means among them). Taylor focuses attention on the first three feeling that this point of discussion is where the greatest increase in understanding of our twenty-first century modern identity is available. They are vital for discernment of the age we inhabit. They provide the hermeneutical key on contemporary plausibility structures with which people identify, structures which drive research and drive culture. Despite some naïve perceptions, we are not talking about a mono-culture.

Western modernities are the fruit of new inventions, new stories, newly constructed self-understanding and related practices; they cannot be explained in terms of perennial features of human life. Some want nothing to do with anything essentialist called human nature per se. They are rooted in new forms of consciousness, a new sense of self and a new world picture: a new outlook. The following articles explore some of the contours of this consciousness. Perhaps you will discover also a trajectory of archivist recovery/retrieval of good things repressed or buried over centuries of time. Are there possibilities for excavating and recovering a robust transcendent dimension to Western culture, for reframing the relationship between religion and the secular? Let us see what we can discover about this vital question.

1. The Immanent Frame

In Charles Taylor, we are offered a particularly insightful analysis of our current cultural ethos. He captures the way in which we have located ourselves in the late modern world and the picture that has taken our minds captive: he identifies it as the immanent frame. This house of the mind and imagination constitutes a unique social imaginary (implicit understanding of the space in which we live) in human history. Our focus at this point of the discussion will be to exposit the key insights of Chapter 15 of A Secular Age (2007) called “The Immanent Frame”. In this critical analysis, he shows how religion has been philosophically and culturally marginalized in the West (even while it is in resurgence by numbers, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia). As a plausibility structure, it has become marginalized or merely tolerated. One might even notice a hegemony against
religion within academic circles. Taylor gives us tough insights and leads us to think freshly and circumspectly about how we have arrived in this cultural space, and about our current options for thinking differently.

The core theme of this landmark book is (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 510) to study the fate of religious faith in the strong sense in the West, meaning: a. belief in a transcendent reality, and b. the connected aspiration of personal transformation, which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing. He is calling into question the subtraction story or Western Master Narrative (one deeply embedded in our late modern consciousness), where science replaces religion after Christendom. Within this perspective, the growth of science entails the death of God and the recession of religion. Religion is often perceived and believed to be replaced by science. Taylor asks some tough questions: Is this hermeneutically valid? When did science become equivalent to secularism and why? He would see this as a situation of fundamental contestability, the crux of the investigation, and a major confusion today. Taylor would call into question this misperception of reality, and suggest that it is a hermeneutical grid that is wanting.

In the face of this phenomenon (subtraction story or secularity 2), he wants to explore with us the plausibility of the life-nurturing, transcendent dimensions of human culture. He does not believe that all citizens of late modernity need to deny the possibility of the transcendent within this immanent frame and live within a horizontal dimension only, which includes a flattened (thin) form of language. From his perspective, the story of the rise of modern social spaces doesn’t need to be given an anti-religious spin (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 579). The actual reality of Western culture is closer to the truth that “a whole gamut of positions, from the most militant atheism to the most orthodox traditional theisms, passing through every possible position on the way, are represented and defended somewhere in our society.” (Ibid. p. 556) They are defended in various non-neutral contexts, institutions and communities.

This actuality creates for citizens of late modernity the sense of being cross-pressured by the different views (the plurality of positions) they encounter. It can make us uncomfortable at times. Citizens may indeed experience these different views in different spheres of their lives. The dialogue and debate of these perceptions is still very robust, with endless potential options to find meaning (the Nova Effect). Both belief and unbelief in God co-exist within society (secularity 3). He articulates a more inclusive and complex reading of late modernity than we often hear from current scholars.

What does Taylor mean by the term immanent frame? The buffered identity (as opposed to the porous pre-modern) self is a key part of such a mental frame. It operates within a disenchanted world where supernatural beings or forces with teleological goals or intentions are deemed close to impossible (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 539). Final causes are eliminated from the picture. With this immanent frame, there is a loss of a cosmic order; everything important is this-worldly, explicable on its own terms; it fits within the time-space-energy-matter dimensions of a strictly material world. Social and political orders are constructed by humans solely for mutual benefit, not to please a divine entity. Society
is made up of individuals (the normative element). Each human is charged with finding her or his own way of being human, their own individual spiritual path (chosen from the options available in the Nova Effect). Everyone has also become an individual measure of the good (*auto-nomos*) and their freedom to choose is a primary concern (the inviolable liberty of personal volition).

But the immanent frame perspective is by no means ethically neutral or strictly objective. It includes some things (values such as secular time) and excludes others—it renders ‘vertical’ or ‘transcendent’ worlds as inaccessible or unthinkable, at the very least irrelevant to thought and life. It takes a hard moral position, and it operates as a philosophically reductionistic stance. The world is leaner, smaller, less rich from this perspective. Taylor refers to this moral position as *exclusive humanism* (otherwise known as naturalistic materialism). The restrictive ideology of scientism follows suit with it.

### 2. Five Cultural Identifiers of Scientism

Although scientism (and the philosophical positivism of A. J. Ayer) has been academically discredited by many philosophers and scientists in the twentieth century, this ideology still seems to dominate popular thinking, even among many bright science students, academic scholars and professional scientists. It is particularly strong among the New Atheists and the cause of much confusion. In order for a belief to be considered valid or credible, scientism requires that it be *scientifically testable*. Thus, much claim to knowledge even within the university is discredited or excluded.

We need to unpack this concern. A valid, while limited, approach to knowing (science) somehow morphs into a dogma: an exclusivist ideology (scientism). In many people’s hearts and minds, it assumes its location within a Closed World System. Taylor captures the potency of its ideology.

> We can come to see the growth of civilization, or modernity, as synonymous with the laying out of a closed immanent frame; within this civilized values develop, and a single-minded focus on the human good, aided by the fuller and fuller use of scientific reason, permits the greatest flourishing possible of human beings.... What emerges from all this is that we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 548)

What are the markers or assumptions of the scientism outlook? Perhaps the following succinct five points can assist our inquiry into the matter.

a. The Epistemological Claim: No knowledge is deemed valid or justified unless its claims can be tested and verified empirically through experimentation, observation and repetition. This criterion is part of an intellectual infrastructure which controls the way people think, argue, infer, and make sense of things. Truth claims that do not submit to this kind of scrutiny become irrelevant, invalid, or unacceptable. This principle of knowledge is heavily weighted or biased towards the instrumental and mechanistic. It sometimes leads us towards more trivial goals in research, Because of the greater degree of *certainty*. 
b. Utopian Sentiment: Science is seen as the futuristic guide to human progress intellectually and culturally. The past tradition, especially that influenced by Christian religion (or any religion for that matter), is taken as false opinion and superstition (even dangerous). It is seen as detrimental to or restrictive of human progress. The growth of scientific knowledge guarantees social and political progress—humans are seen to be flourishing and getting better because of science, technology and medicine. Scientism inherently assumes a warfare model in science-religion relations, a posture which began mid-19th century. It assumes that as science advances, religion is culturally replaced or displaced, demoted in importance to the point of redundancy. The progress myth entailed in scientism reaches a utopian pitch at times. This is the tone we often find in 'Wired Magazine', or the 'Humanist Manifesto' or in our post-humanist friends. Quentin Schultze speaks to this in his book Habits of the High Tech Heart (2002). There is a fair amount of denial of the problems that emerge with new technology, and ethical issues which emerge with scientific advances.

The next century can and should be the humanist century. Dramatic scientific, technological, and ever-accelerating social and political changes crowd our awareness. We have virtually conquered the planet, explored the moon, overcome the natural limits of travel and communication; we stand at the dawn of a new age ... Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our lifespan, significantly modify our behavior, and alter the course of human evolution. (Humanist Manifesto II, p. 5)

c. Intellectual Exclusion or Hegemony: Insights from the humanities, philosophy and theology are treated with the hermeneutic of suspicion. Scientific rationalism dismisses faith as mere fideism (belief without good reasons, or against the evidence) or irrationality (outside the grasp of rational mankind). Scientism pits truth against beauty and goodness. To be poetic is taken to be trivial or irrelevant. Scientism’s inherent materialism entails that “science” refuses mystery, the metaphysical or anything transcendent, the miraculous, even the metaphorical, poetic or epiphanic. Certain human ways of knowing are simply written off and disrespected; this can be accompanied by a good supply of academic hubris.

d. Anthropological Implications: People are viewed as sophisticated cogs in the cosmic machinery, or simplified as the most intelligent animals (higher primates). All human characteristics, including mind or soul, are believed to be explicable in terms of body (neuron networks, DNA makeup, biochemistry or physiology, at bottom physics and chemistry). There is a philosophical (ontological) reductionism at work, i.e. the higher is explained in terms of the lower, mind in terms of brain, human social behaviour in terms of physics and chemistry. Humans are appreciated mainly for their instrumental value: earning capacity, socio-political usefulness and their excellencies of giftedness. (See for further discussion Craig Gay, The Way of the Modern World; E.F. Schumacher, A Guide for the Perplexed; Thomas Nagel’s Mind and Cosmos)

e. Implications for Ethics: Science is seen to normatively provide a more reliable and superior decision-making guide; it becomes the new alternative to religion and morals in discerning the good and the shaping of the moral self (Sam Harris, The Moral Landscape: how science can determine human values). In a moral sense, science moves into dominance as a culture sphere, absorbs and redefines morality in scientific
categories, according to a scientific agenda. Scientific principle and rationality claims to be applicable to all, and thus is much less divisive than religion. Religious or personal moral values are to be kept to the private sphere of one’s life, but not to be part of public discourse (Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*). It is also important to note here that scientism’s ethical outlook objectifies the world, giving one a sense of dominance or control over it. Knowledge, technology or expertise offers privilege to those in power. Ethical self-justification can often occur.

To sum up, scientism is the notion that natural science constitutes the most authoritative (if not the only legitimate) epistemology or form of human knowing, and that it is superior to all other interpretations of life. It assumes a materialistic, immanent, Closed World System, which rejects the validity of any transcendent elements. There is a strong attraction to the idea that we are in an order of nature and that we do not and cannot transcend it. David Hart captures the sentiment.

An admirably severe discipline of interpretive and theoretical restraint [modern empirical science] has been transformed into its perfect and irrepressibly wanton opposite: what began as a principled refusal of metaphysical speculation, for the sake of specific empirical inquiries, has now been mistaken for a comprehensive knowledge of the metaphysical shape of reality; the art of humble questioning has been mistaken for the sure possession of ultimate conclusions. This makes a mockery of real science. (D.B. Hart, 2013, p. 71)

Further on the immanent frame, the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what Taylor wants to call “the immanent frame”. There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted with a supernatural one, an “immanent” world over against a possible “transcendent” one. (C. Taylor. 2007, p. 542)

Taylor points out two different ways of seeing the world within this immanent frame, closed (CWS), and open. One does have the choice in late modernity to open self to the beyond or the transcendent, the more. As per Wittgenstein, each way of seeing is a picture that holds us captive (seems to us both natural and logically unavoidable). It constitutes the horizon within which we observe, think and reason. But of course, it can block out (make us blind to) certain aspects of reality by the very nature of how it shapes our way of analyzing the world. We must not be in hermeneutical denial. Scientific ways of seeing and knowing restrict our ability to see and know. It involves an unquestioned background, something whose shape is not perceived, but which conditions, largely unnoticed, the way we think, infer, experience, process claims and arguments. For example, a major thesis in modernity is that science must bring secularity in its train, which for Taylor is a non-obvious, unproven and biased claim. It is only one of the stories available in late modernity. It should be thought through more carefully. But many of us take it on board as a cultural assumption (a default position) without thinking about it (see David Bentley Hart’s brilliant critique of this view in *The Experience of God: being, consciousness, bliss. 2013*).
From within this mental and emotional picture, it just seems obvious to many who hold it that the order of the argument proceeds from science to atheism (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 565), that modernization brings secularization. In the nineteenth century, Durkheim and others assumed that science would develop to the point where people no longer need to believe in God or religion. They would graduate from such superstition. This is paralleled in the angry rhetoric of the New Atheists of today. But we note with Taylor that there exists a hidden leap of faith in this stance. It carries with it a false aura that it is obvious, or a logical conclusion. But it is not. It involves, however, a moral attraction to a materialistic spin on reality, a moral outlook (where God and religion is at the bottom of important things to consider).

It is not based on scientific facts at all (despite the fact that it takes some of its inspiration from the epistemological success of science, as we see above). There is a heavy focus on human goods, on human flourishing: rights, welfare, equality, and democracy. Taylor writes:

We can come to see the growth of civilization, or modernity, as synonymous with laying out of a closed immanent frame; within this civilized values develop, and a single-minded focus on the human good aided by a fuller and fuller use of scientific reason, permits the greatest flourishing possible of human beings. Religion not only menaces these goals with its fanaticism, but it also undercuts reason, which comes to be seen as rigorously requiring scientific materialism. (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 548)

As already stated, we currently live in this cross-pressured space, with competing views in operation. Our culture pulls us in both directions: secular and religious (found in famous writers such as Blake, Goethe, Dostoyevski, Milosz). The struggle for belief is ongoing, never definitively won or lost today. This is the major theme of the insightful CBC Ideas Series produced by David Cayley called After Atheism.

Taylor notices that we know of both:

a. Those who opt for the ordered, impersonal universe, whether in the scientistic-materialistic form, or in a more spiritualized variant, feel the imminent loss of a world of beauty, meaning, warmth, as well as of the perspective of self-transformation beyond the everyday (along with regrets about loss of its positive impact on society and nostalgia for a distant yesterday). Albert Camus is an example.

b. Those whose strongest leanings move them towards at least some search for spiritual meaning, and often towards God. (592-3)
3. Two Distinct Approaches to Seeing the World

In this light, it is helpful to understand the impact of two distinct ways of engaging the world intellectually and philosophically: epistemological and hermeneutical. These two perspectives emerged as a helpful talking point in a recent lecture on recent Middle European History at St. John’s College, UBC. A professor of Polish descent had a vastly different perspective to those who favored the German or British way of seeing this post-World War 2 history. They had two radically different ways of seeing the issues.

a. Epistemological Approach (Descartes, Locke, Hume). The set of priority relations within this picture often tends towards a closed world position (CWS). Its assumptions include the following:

i. Knowledge of self and its status come before knowledge of the world (things) and others.

ii. Knowledge of reality is a neutral fact before we (the self) attribute value to it.

iii. Knowledge of things of the natural order comes before any theoretical invocations or any transcendence (which is thereby problematized, doubted or repressed). This approach tends to write transcendence out of the equation.

Within this view, the individual is primary and certainty is within the mind. The self is an independent, disengaged subject reflexively controlling its own thought processes, self-responsibly. The oft-presumed neutrality of this view is in question. The way of seeing is in fact a heavily value-laden approach or posture. It offers a whole construction of identity and society with its own distinctive priorities and values.

Materialism, in point of fact, is an aesthetic construction (not arising from science), a story many of us tell ourselves as late moderns, over and over again, about the entire cosmos and our place within it, our value, identity, trajectory and purpose. Humans have always had a way of placing themselves in the context of the cosmos and time; it is not actually possible to do without such perspectival reflections. But it depends on a certain naturalistic metaphysics or worldview, which was not always as common historically as it is today. But is it rigorously plausible? Taylor’s contention is that the power of materialism today comes not from scientific “facts”, but has rather to be explained in terms of the power of a certain package uniting materialism with a moral outlook, the package we call “atheistic humanism” or exclusive humanism. (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 569)

It works off an ontological thesis of materialism: everything which is, is based on “matter”, without explaining why this is taken as true.
Even though rooted in the epistemological success of science, Taylor questions whether we are to logically conclude that everything is *nothing but* matter and that we should try to define our entire human and natural situation in terms of matter alone. Enlightenment of this sort is a kind of *excarnation* or out-of-body thinking. The self is radically abstracted from its socio-cultural embodiment and its historical narrative and retreats to the mind.

This approach employs a *designative* use of language (Hobbes to Locke to Condillac) which traps the pursuit of wisdom within language and confines it to immanence, where language and its relationship to truth are reduced to pointing. Language here primarily designates objects in the world. The object is observed, held at arms length, but not participated in. One assumes a use of language based on quantitative judgments that are non-subject dependent. This tradition also contributes to a mechanistic outlook on the universe. It is committed to the primacy of empirical epistemology (evidence and justified belief). It is not oriented to, but skeptical of, universals or essences.

What about ethics? Once upon a time, human beings took their norms, their goods, their standards of ultimate value from an authority outside themselves; from God, or the gods, or the nature of Being or the cosmos. But then they came to see that these higher authorities were their own *fictions*, and they realized they had to establish their norms and values for themselves, on their own authority. This is a radicalization of the coming to adulthood story as it figures in the science-driven argument for materialism. The dramatic claim to establish our own standards comes down to the thought that we no longer receive those norms from an authority outside us, but rather from our own scientific investigations. (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 580) We answer to no one; we are morally *self-authorized*.

Part of this Master Narrative is that for proponents of the death of God, they want to see *God-absence* as a property of the universe which science lays bare. Taylor notes:

> It is only within some understanding of agency, in which disengaged scientific inquiry is woven into a story of courageous adulthood, to be attained through a renunciation of the more ‘childish’ comforts in meaning and beatitude, that the death of God story appears obvious. (Ibid. p. 565)

Of course, he questions this narrative, this specific secularization thesis that he calls secularism 2, and holds it up for deeper scrutiny. The claim is that religious belief is a childish temptation and a beautiful world (think Peter Pan), lacking the courage to face reality and grow up into a more complex, harsh world. Maturing into adulthood implies leaving faith in God behind. But loss of faith in adulthood is not an obvious fact of observable reality, but a construction of human identity and our place in the world (Ibid. p. 565). Just because it is common does not make it correct. Taylor questions whether it contains hermeneutical adequacy and weight (Ibid. p. 567). He is not at all convinced that the arguments from natural science to atheism are strong; they seem to include bad reason, inconclusive arguments, and are based on faulty unreflective assumptions.
b. Second Way of Seeing Reality: the Hermeneutical Approach (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer). The presuppositions of this approach are:

i. Self is not the first priority: the world, society and the game of life come first. We only have knowledge as agents coping with the world, and it makes no sense to doubt that world.

ii. There is no priority of a neutral grasp of things over and above their value.

iii. Our primordial identity is as a new player inducted into an old game.

iv. Transcendence or the divine horizon is a possible larger context of this game (radical skepticism is not as strong). There is a smaller likelihood of a closed world system (CWS) view in the hermeneutical approach to the world. In a sense it is a more humble and nuanced view of the location of late moderns.

Within this view, therefore, one is not so boxed in or restricted regarding the parameters of thinking. Within this open immanent frame, certain hard features of the first approach to reality can be deconstructed and the weaknesses of such features exposed. Enlightenment could and does mean an engaging belief in God for millions if not billions around the world in late modernity. In fact, it seems that ideologically atheistic/materialistic China is set to become the largest Christian population of any country in the near future.

The first view is definitely a more myopic possibility for making sense of the world. Philosopher Thomas Nagel (2012) in *Mind & Cosmos* questions materialistic naturalism’s explanatory capacity in making sense of consciousness, purpose or teleology and moral value. He is joined by David Bentley Hart (2013). We may well ask: Is it actually, at the end of the day, a progressive, heuristic environment for thought worthy of academia? How does one avoid closed-minded and dogmatic rationalism? Hard rationalism has a way of closing down the investigation and the dialogue.

We propose that one gets more purchase from the hermeneutical approach, especially as one moves beyond the necessarily restrictive purview of science itself. As Nobel Laureate Peter Medawar says, science the self-limiting methodology was never meant to be turned into an ontology or metaphysics (reductive materialism), never meant to be the final word on noble questions to be explored. When science morphs into the ideology of scientism, it leads to nihilism, the loss of meaning. Science was never meant to constitute a worldview; it does not contain the intellectual equipment for such. David Bentley Hart (2013) in his most recent book, *The Experience of God: being, consciousness, bliss*, offers an amazing follow through from this discussion and helps citizens of late modern culture avoid implosion into nihilism and cynicism.

Naturalism is a picture of the whole of reality that cannot, according to its own intrinsic premises, address the being of the whole; it is a metaphysics of the rejection of metaphysics, a
transcendental certainty of the impossibility of transcendent truth, and so requires an act of pure credence logically immune to any verification…. Thus naturalism must forever remain a pure assertion, a pure conviction, a confession of blind assurance in an inaccessible beyond; and that beyond, more paradoxically still, is the beyond of no beyond. (D.B. Hart, 2013, p. 77)

Another dimension of our current dilemma is the subjectivizing of morality. This also leads to relativism and nihilism: no shared code or normativity for the common good, no social glue or basis for resolving conflict. According to Notre Dame scholar Brad Gregory’s brilliant insight into our historical context,

A transformation from a substantive morality of the good to a formal morality of rights constitutes the central change in Western ethics over the past half millennium, in terms of theories, practices, laws, and institutions…. This rights morality relied on substantive, share beliefs about human goods but unwittingly fashioned an institutional framework for their subversion. (B. Gregory, 2012, pp. 184-5)

The discourse on rights began in a context of a perception of the common good; it was allied to the virtues within an overall transcendent horizon. But eventually it deteriorated to private interest, choice and entitlement. Initially, “properly to exercise one’s rights was to exercise one’s freedom and to pursue one’s individual good with an eye toward the common good” (Ibid. p. 197). Today one’s individual good seems to be in tension with the common good—rights discourse is accompanied by an expansive list of wishes, preferences and entitlements guaranteed by the state.

Furthermore, modern Western moral philosophy has failed to discover or create a convincing secular foundation for ethics, and thus for shared moral community independent of inherited Christian or other religious beliefs. It has failed in providing answers to Life Questions based on secular reason alone. Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

Modern moral philosophy has miscarried its central objective. Not only has it failed to stem the subjectivization of morality….; it has augmented it in a secular, rationalist register. This failure has quite properly marginalized professional moral philosophy, at least as currently institutionalized, as a realistic resource for resolving any ethical disagreements, because it has no indication of being able to do anything but perpetuate them.” (quoted by B. Gregory, Ibid. p. 220)

Gregory concludes that we are left with a major dilemma. The language of rights has broken down philosophically within the immanent frame of materialistic naturalism.

The commitments to metaphysical naturalism and ideological scientism that govern “public reason” dictate a conception of reality that prevents the grounding of any morality at all…. If metaphysical naturalism is true then human rights are not and cannot be real, natural or discovered. They are at most constructed conventions or useful fictions, but intellectually they are unwarranted remnants from a rejected conception of reality. (B. Gregory, 2012, p. 224-5)

Gregory raises questions about “The blithe and incoherent denial of the category of truth in the domain of human morality, values, and meaning among many academics. It is
frequently alleged that all human meaning, morality and values can be nothing more than whatever human beings of different times and cultures subjectively and contingently construct for themselves” (Ibid. p. 18). This gives us some things to work on in the discussion that follows: i.e. how to ground truth claims about morality and values amid swarms of incompatible, shifting assertions about them remains a genuine and pressing problem. Gregory ponders, “What sort of public life or common culture is possible in societies whose members share even fewer substantive beliefs, norms and values save for a nearly universal embrace of consumerist acquisitiveness” (Ibid. p. 20). This he refers to as the current state of hyperpluralism.

4. Mythology that Currently Haunts the Relationship between Fides et Ratio

We suggest that our current state of Nihilism and Cynicism stems from a massive confusion about the relationship between faith and various types of reason. Faith is a multivalent concept and applies equally to hard science as well as relationships or the study of Holy Scripture. Below are some of the myths that set up the problematic we are trying to address. They need to be deconstructed and evaluated for their cogency.

a. Faith and reason are inherently incompatible, or in opposition.

b. Reason does not involve faith at any level of its operation.

c. Modern reason has made Christian faith redundant; faith is a primitive disposition of our medieval ancestors.

d. Faith is credulous assent to unfounded premises, a belief in something that is untrue or at least suspect.

e. Reason is a pure, disinterested obedience to empirical fact; methodological naturalism implies/requires belief in philosophical naturalism.

f. Reason is morally and ideologically neutral, the same for all thinking human beings, therefore universal—unifying society.

g. Faith & reason exist in separate incompatible arenas; reason deals in physical causes only, while faith deals with supernatural/spiritual/magical causes.

h. Faith is the irrational belief in the opposite direction of where scientific evidence leads us.

i. Faith is seated in the emotions or sentimentality; reason is a non-emotional, cool operation of the disinterested mind.

j. Good reason requires a materialistic universe; materialism is a fact of deductive logic.
Therefore we need a critical assessment of current metaphysical, epistemological and anthropological assumptions in our day to find the liberation from the Nihilistic world picture that has taken us captive. We propose that it is possible to think critically and wisely within a different framework or horizon. We can discover a richer, more robust understanding of reason.
Part II. Late Modernity and Recovery from its Nihilist Slumber

The following ten discussions explain why nihilism need not have the final word in late modernity, and what the recovery of richer meaning might look like. It wakes us up from our sleep or semi-consciousness and adds real perspective to our current struggle for identity and meaning.

1. Nihilism is Not the Final Word: a Wager on Tragic Optimism

University students are attracted to philosophical nihilism for a variety of reasons, some personal, some from an academic trail they are pursuing, perhaps in the Humanities or Social Sciences. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith (2009, Souls in Transition) depicts the American 18-23 year old generation as soft ontological antirealists, epistemological skeptics (question everything), perspectivalists (various ways to see this; mine is only one among many alternatives), living in subjective isolation (following my own unique path), constructivists: building my self and my morality from the ground up (often rejecting the tradition of my parents), and moral intuitionists (how I feel about a situation or decision is the most important factor).

Viennese Psychologist Victor Frankl (1992, p. 152) once wrote: "The existential vacuum which is the mass neurosis of the present time can be described as a private and personal form of nihilism; for nihilism can be defined as the contention that being has no meaning." Nihilists pride themselves in their realism (dispelling fantasy and cutting through false hope). But we want to examine the deeper consequences of nihilism. It often appeals to the rebel inside or it just feels cool. We once met a passionate young student who was reading everything he could find written by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the godfather of contemporary Poststructuralist thought. For him, the writings resonated; they were a revelation to his young vision. But he didn't recognize at the time the significant costs to this outlook, or how it had led to cultural deterioration.

Is there perhaps a nihilist hidden deep down in each of us? There is little doubt that we will encounter a nihilist thinker, writer or artist in our journey. Some see it as a logical extension of philosophical naturalism or scientism (that we are nothing but matter in motion and therefore in terms of our identity, we are an empty bubble on the sea of nothingness--J.P. Sartre). We are lost in the cosmos as Walker Percy writes. Is university education today leading us to become cynics--soft ontological antirealists and epistemological skeptics? Is it due to the failure of modernity to deliver on its promises? Is it the outlook of a favorite sociology professor? Has our subjectivist morality hit the wall of conflict and confusion, destroying our trust in others? The personal and social cost can be punishing both for the individual nihilist and those who relate to her.

We can witness Nihilism and its angst in Shakespeare’s brilliant play Hamlet. The tragedy of the bright young Danish Prince Hamlet is that he never found his calling in life. He was constantly tortured with inner and interpersonal conflicts due to the loss of his father and the quick marriage of his mother, the Queen, to his uncle. Suspecting a
conspiracy, he was haunted by lies, resentment towards his stepfather, disappointment in his mother and even self-hatred. He was morally confused and conflicted, at times suicidal, living in a constant state of angst. He could have been a reformer for his world. After all, he was still heir to the throne. But instead, the kingdom imploded around him, and he collapsed personally. It all ended in nihilism and death. Immorality, intrigue and corruption led to collapse of meaning for Hamlet and the end of loyalty, even of his beloved Ophelia and close friends Rosencrantz and Gildenstern. Everything was rotten in Denmark to this young, lonely, nihilistic prince. Perhaps at some level Hamlet is us. We late moderns are lost and we don't know who or what to trust. We've been taught to question everything, to deconstruct any claims to truth as a power interest. We are cynics.

There are deep problems with nihilism and with its godchild cynicism that inhabits the mind. Cynicism about the good and true is highly corrosive to human relationships. It can even hinder the very possibility of long-term friendship or marital covenant, and destroy faith in good institutions. It means that I only need to care for myself, or worse it becomes a fake declaration of my victimhood. Is it all just a matter of negotiating power relations or playing the truth games around the department? Reputable psychologists tell us that vulnerability, trust, acceptance and love, are all key qualities of intimacy. These very qualities are held suspect by many who are captivated by cynicism. Other people are not calculated to be worthy of the vagaries and vulnerability of intimacy. What if they betray us? The cynic's behavioral pattern and attitudinal make-up have a tendency to drive people away, thus fulfilling the internally driven cyclical philosophy that people don't really care, and are not worth the effort. Brilliant Canadian novelist David Adams Richards (2009) reveals something deeply self-righteous about the cynic in his writing. He listened to cynical bike gangsters brag about their murders in a Montreal bar. Many of us are familiar with our original shock and disgust at the brutality shown in the Godfather films, or the current ISIS clan.

It can be a special technique for controlling the world: thoroughgoing cynics trust no one, and resent everyone. Other people (even colleagues) are the first victims of cynicism: they are there to be manipulated, not respected, trusted or loved. There is a sense in which the cynic is always at war with everyone (believing in the all against all philosophy of Thomas Hobbes). We recently heard from a graduate student in the UK who was exploited by the very person whom she trusted to mentor her and show her the ropes of the laboratory. This individual simply took credit for her hard work and published it under his name. This happens too often in graduate school. Cynicism hurts; it contains an anti-human spirit. With cynicism as one's inspiration, as one's space for developing identity, it is difficult to imagine how any new ideals or possibilities can survive, or how anyone could impress. Everyone else, especially those who have faith in ideals or people, looks like a fool in the eyes of a cynic. A pressing question today is: Can we maintain a civil society if we buy into such nihilism?

Secondly, the cynic can be personally cannibalized by his own cynicism. Sometimes a cynic can feel special, transcending the blind, naive masses. But the addictive nature of cynicism can lead into a kind of psychological slavery. Self-hatred is often as strong as scorn for others, turning the cynic eventually into a handicapped self-despising person.
Many students who take nihilism seriously and try to live it consistently tell of experiences where they felt themselves sucked into a spiritual black hole. What was cool and trendy at first eventually became personally frightening, dark and depressing—a psychological trap. Once the black cataracts of nihilism grow over the eyes, there is little hope of seeing the beautiful or hopeful, or even allowing them the possibility of authentic existence. Thanatos (the death instinct) attitudes begin to dominate the mind and drive the heart as one imbibes more nihilist film and literature, and hangs out with the disenchanted souls.

Thirdly, cynicism is destructive of one’s actual or potential relationship with God. In the nihilistic worldview, the divine either does not exist or is at the very least absent, unavailable. Some nihilists even despise God. Nietzsche wrote about trapping the Holy Spirit in the basement and tossing him out the window. However, even someone who claims to have a relationship with God can invite deterioration in that relationship due to the pride and bitterness of cynicism. In this case, God is put on trial by the cynic, who is ironically calling God to account for the pain he has suffered, with no real expectation of an answer. As we understand the biblical God of theism, this is a formula for disastrous divine-human relations, promoting alienation that leads to even more intense cynicism. So love and trust not only deteriorates on the human level; it also fractures the relationship between the cynic and God. The true cynic refuses to believe that God could care. The tragedy is that the cynic rejects God's love out of anger and disillusionment, when God may be the only one who can deal with the pain and loneliness at hand. We all need a miracle at times in our life. Cynicism becomes spiritually poisonous; it kills God in our hearts. The pain of this can sear the soul and the conscience at once. It can also kill our ability to feel empathy for others. This came out in a recent Globe and Mail article by Canadian writer and journalist Patricia Pearson called “Psycho-Mania” (page F4, Saturday, August 16, 2014). Perhaps we have grown too accustomed to sociopathic (anti-social) tendencies in our entrepreneurs, political leaders and television stars.

We contend that late moderns should stand up against nihilism. It must not have the last word in our lives. Together with Victor Frankl and many other top scholars like Iris Murdoch, we believe that humans need hope and meaning to flourish; they need to believe in the good and the power to make a difference in order to flourish. Humans deeply need intimacy with and support from other people, and ultimately find their fullest meaning in communion with God. Oxford English scholar C.S. Lewis profoundly captures the delicacy of the issue at hand with this stark warning against relishing in our jaded state of nihilism:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. (C.S. Lewis, Four Loves, pp. 111-12)
Philosopher David Hart (2009, p. 21) claims that the ethos of late modernity, its primal ideology, is nihilism, the belief in nothingness or absence. By this, he means that “there is no substantial criterion by which to judge our choices higher than the unquestioned good of free choice itself, and that therefore all judgment, divine no less than human, is in some sense an infringement upon our freedom.” Paul, a political science professor friend, called it the blasphemy of autonomy: the claim that each individual not only is autonomous, but should be autonomous. Choice itself, not what we choose, is the primary good which trumps all other goods. The chief value of our age is “the inviolable liberty of personal volition, the right to decide for ourselves what we believe, want, need, own, or serve.” The new hot political issue in North America is what gender I choose to become, based on my choice alone, nothing else. This entails the “nonexistence of the transcendence of any standard of the good that has the power (or the right) to order our desires toward the higher end” (Ibid. p. 22). A perfectly consistent ethics of choice would ultimately erase any meaningful distinction between good and evil, compassion and cruelty, love and hatred, reverence and transgression (Ibid. p. 23). Many European philosophers are willing to identify themselves as nihilists, however hard that is to live consistently, with a rejection of any source of ultimate truth transcendent of self or world, anything beyond the immanent time-space-energy-matter frame.

French philosophical anthropologist René Girard exposes Nietzsche's dark heritage: the weak and the victim do not matter and should not be protected and ought to be used as a scapegoat for the ills of society (R. Girard, 2002, p. 170f). In this sense, nihilism is an anti-humanism: it denies the possibility of significance and close relationships and basic human trust and dignity that are required for our flourishing. Cynics also turn on each other as powerfully depicted in Sartre's famous play No Exit. In this play the characters are continuous playing manipulative games between the three of them. It is heart wrenching to watch. One person attempts to leave; the door opens but she cannot bring herself to exit; the psychological trap has secured the three into this continuous relational hell.

If we pay close attention to what kept French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas alive in his Gulag camp, it was not nihilism or cynicism and hatred for the guards. It was the meaning of seeing his wife again, living for her, of the possibility of a future. While others perished from daily abuse, oppression and despair, he put his hope on a vision of
the future. This led him to develop the whole ethical theory of personal responsibility: a sense of infinite responsibility for the other (*l’autri*), i.e. that interhuman relationships have an ultimate priority. Communal meaning kept him alive, ethics lived in the presence of another person. Again Ann Voskamp (2011) writes: “The sages and prophets, the disciples and revolutionaries, they are the ones up on the ramparts, up on the wall pointing to the dawn of the new Kingdom coming, pointing to the light that breaks through all things broken, pointing to redemption always rising and to the Blazing God who never sleeps.”

Nihilism does not have the last word. Life is difficult; we all agree. There is no facile formula that makes everything all better, despite what multitudes of pop culture pundits offer. To be human in our world (a very good, but also very broken and unjust world) means that we often witness and experience hardship, pain and suffering, even violence against the neighbor or ourselves. What are we to think of this senseless violence swallowing the innocent, cutting short a whole life of potential in a child soldier in the Congo? Will the killing and displacement (nearing two million refugees) and destruction in Syria and Iraq ever quit? Nihilistic (Dionysian) violence erupts again and again around the globe; it knows no boundaries in its will-to-violence.

Reality hurts us, burdens us, at times. The choices we have to make, the risks that have to be taken, the responsibilities that have to be carried are not easy. Teenagers and young adults feel this intensely in the pressure to succeed in education and life. The formulae we learn early in life often break down. To be human is to experience disappointments and broken dreams. One often hears of the post-university seven year run at the career wall. We don't always get what we want, even when we train for it all the way to a PhD. There are no guarantees of high correlation between aim and achievement, expectation and event, merit and honor. To live is to suffer, like it or not, and sometimes it occurs by the hands of those we love, admire and trust the most. To love well even at its best is to suffer. This can cause deep stress, even trauma—it is not just soldiers from Afghanistan who suffer PTSD. But it can also create the space in which true wisdom and character begin to emerge. After all, very few avoid heartbreak, suffering and even brokenness during their entire life. But some learn to make it work for them and for the good of others.

The critical issue seems to be our response to the painful and disappointing experiences of life. Eventually we all will face them. Many of us try the irresponsible (impossible) route: to avoid suffering at all costs. However, to mature means that we must find meaning in our suffering and grow from and through it. This is the way of health: taking courageous responsibility to find answers to life's problems, to confront the big questions head on. We must be constantly willing to seek help, to grow and learn from our mentors and wise counselors: to rethink, revise, re-approach, take time to heal and re-engage life. Perhaps your memory goes to Winston Churchill and his famous post-war advice to British youth: “Never, never, never give up.” Be unstoppable, unrelenting in pursuing the good and your goals.
Some of the great treasures of our human existence involve digging deeper than we ever thought possible, drilling down into our pain to find hope and meaning, to find a place of embrace. The narcissism of our day tempts us to give up, accept easy answers, attempt to skirt our problems, throw in the towel far too quickly. This approach offers a road to neurosis, un-health, perpetual immaturity and superficiality. It is a cheap trick played against those who only skate on the surface of human existence. Technology won't work either; it won't make us more human or bypass all pain. No deeper character will emerge without learning the art of negotiating suffering, wrestling with the meaning in our suffering. We will continue to grab onto the nearest ideology package, turning our anger against others, or live a cliché.

Deconstruction only goes so far and then we are left with nothing but ashes. Without a sound worldview, we fail to reckon with our narrative self; we can go all the way down and find only an ethereal fantasy, absence. It may be cool and chic to quote Ingmar Bergman, Franz Kafka, Jean Paul Sartre, or Michel Foucault in Humanities undergrad, but where will they be when you face the greater challenges of life and are called upon to give leadership at work or home? Are they going to get you through your first depression, the death of a parent, the suffering of your child or even a fight with your husband? "Meaningless, meaningless", cries the teacher in Ecclesiastes. These prophets of despair can only tell you that yes, this is your personal hell on earth. You've arrived; you're fully alienated. You now have the right to utter the primal scream with artist Edvard Munsch. Being an intellectual doesn't make Nihilism any easier; it just offers it a more sophisticated language. You can talk about the current lost generation ad infinitum. But, at the end of the day, can a nihilist even trust her own thoughts and emotions if there is only her and nothingness to count on? This is the scorpion’s sting in Nihilism.

To live an integrated life, to work from a deeper, thicker self, there must be a heroic commitment to transform tragedy into personal victory. It involves concrete, constructive responses working from good, rich sources of the self. That may involve interdisciplinary research or creative think tanks or discussion rooms. The eminent heroes of our world, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Charles Malik, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Miraslov Volf, Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, Joni Eareckson, Desmond Tutu, Lech Walesa, Gary Haugen, Vaclav Havel, Romeo Dallaire stand out from the mob, show vision and make something good out of an evil or painful situation, injustice, even a terrible tragedy. They find a redemptive way forward with a will-to-meaning, a will-to-compassion, a will-to-justice for victims, a will-to-reconciliation and repair, ultimately a will-to-hope. They stop projecting the problem on everybody else, and take responsibility for themselves and their world. The willingness to take responsibility seems distinctively lacking in many late modern theories, according to Levinas. Heroic people learn to leverage love, not hate and vengeance. Their vision for a better world emerges out of the experiential crucible of a trial by fire. Somewhere, they found a fresh vision to go up against nihilism, psychopathy, cynicism and naked will to power. Nelson Mandela is a celebrated international public example. We want to stake our claim alongside this kind of integrated selves and servant leadership.
What is their source of such "tragic optimism", optimism in the teeth of tragedy? Now there’s a worthy research project. That source must give them strength to take action toward the good in the midst of evil and suffering, within a stance of radical hope, with a heart full of tough love as Bruce Cockburn sings. They face into the cold wind of adversity and operate from deep faith and conviction in higher principles, and the possibility of a better world. They seek new paradigms, dig deep and fight for constructive alternatives, mutual respect, justice for the oppressed, human rights and dignity, compassion towards one’s neighbor, the poor, the stranger and the immigrant. Faithlessness is our enemy today (egregious self-interest and opportunism, consumerism and superficial greed) says award-winning Canadian novelist David Adams Richards (2009). Callow lies and deceptive myths abound and are marketed energetically in late modernity.
2. Nihilism is Not the Final Word: A Committed Wager on Love

Which questions guide our lives? Which questions do we make our own? Which questions deserve our undivided attention and full personal commitment? Which questions provide us with constructive cultural drivers? Finding the right questions is crucial to finding the right answers. It’s questions about our identity, our sense of self (Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*; Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self*) that run deep with us. It’s about how we see the world, what ‘take’ or interpretation we have on our context. Do we fabricate a compulsive, false self, a public and private self? Do we have a critically realistic view of the world or are we living a fantasy? Will we take responsibility for ourselves, our impact on others, on the biosphere? In light of these important questions, it seems to us that to give up on the possibility of genuine love itself is an unfathomable tragedy, a Faustian deal. It sells out huge potential and leverage in all of our relationships. It shrinks us.

Love empowers people; it has a way of reconstituting the chaos and alienation in our lives. Love is tough in the midst of tragedy, the secret to spiritual enrichment. It enhances our emotional intelligence, creates constructive power in our empathy. The cynic gives up far too much when giving up on love, or any transcendent source of love, divine source of the good. We are often in crisis because we have not learned to receive and give love—a crisis of sources of identity. Loving relationships are the proper context for inner healing; they offer productive hope, and deep personal challenge. Psychiatrist Scott Peck's definition of love is "a commitment to the spiritual growth of another person." Now that’s traction on a vision for life. Building into others is a well-documented, strong source of meaning, as studied in the Happiness Research Project at University of British Columbia by Mark Holder. We can leave a legacy in other people, whose lives we have enriched and inspired.

Love helps us to integrate our personality, while cynicism serves up psychic entropy, spiritual disintegration. Love sets a person free, while cynicism boxes a person in with fear, anger, guilt and despair—building a high impenetrable wall around self. Love is the highest possible human goal and the ultimate meaning of life, the ultimate ethical jewel, a super-virtue. It is the best investment one could make. It is quite a step above and beyond tolerance, or bland respect. We'll wager much on weighty love over cheap despair or cowardly narcissistic escape any day. We'll put our money on reconciliation and forgiveness as a vital life force, as a trajectory of healing and hope. Cynicism is a massive waste of time, talent, and money, riddled with multiple missed opportunities for growth and leadership. It can even lead to despair, a trap which Danish philosopher Kierkegaard warned us about. Love is a kind of economy worthy of our sharpest trading.

As Charles Taylor has noted, some enlightened moderns (e.g. Voltaire, Schopenhauer) have held the cosmic trial in their minds. They have sentenced the divine and declared the death of God, the banishment of God from Western civilization. One take on us is that we late moderns are the courageous generation trying to live without God, to live after God. Many have taken this stance in the twentieth century. But is that actually possible asks David Bentley Hart (2013), to dismiss the very ground of one’s being, one’s reason, one’s consciousness, one’s identity, of beauty itself? Contemporary philosopher Thomas
Nagel (2012) declares that many atheists like himself still fear that God might exist. He admits that he has a cosmic authority problem; we don't want God to exist. Of course, many others wish they could believe in God, but cannot seem to do it (Camus). If God is dead, love seems reducible to a human mutual self-interest contract at best. Or at worst, it becomes brute survival and mutual manipulation for personal pleasure or economic gain—using others to get what you want. This is a crass formula for human ethics and personal relationships, heading us into a dark, inhuman downward spiral. It is much easier to become cynical if one seriously entertains such unbelief. But is this wise or fruitful?

Biblical agape love remains stubbornly grounded in God. "God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in her." (I John 5:16). This is a distinctive life posture, a profound wager on transcendent goodness (Psalm 107). Could love actually be more fundamental, more real, to our existence than matter and energy? That’s the wager, a profound question worth researching. This divine music has not stopped playing in a secular culture; we are not by necessity trapped by our immanent frame. Taylor notes that atheism is merely a ‘take’ on the world not the final position for intelligent people. What’s the narrative? The radical theism of Christianity reveals a God who is familiar with human suffering (Philip Yancey 2000), who has a stake in our well-being, a God who has identified with the human community in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ. This is a God who has gone to the gallows for us, a God who promises to be there, with us, in our time of disappointment and broken dreams, a God who has experienced our suffering and rejection, our humiliating bullying. Famous sociologist Jurgen Habermas became disillusioned with secularism several years ago realizing that reason requires the inspiration of religion in order to flourish.

The claim here, within a nihilistic age, is that life integrated around God is a powerful antidote against cynicism and nihilism. Again Psychiatrist Dr. Scott Peck constantly tries to help his clients to take God and self more seriously on the road to mental and emotional health. He encourages people to stop the game of lies—to themselves and others—in order to live authentically, honestly, courageously. He sees this as the road to civility, the road out of addictions and self-destruction, and the way to become more human, a better human. One might also turn to Psychiatrist Curt Thompson (Anatomy of the Soul, 2010, p. 7) for surprising insights on the connections between neuroscience and a transformative relationship with God—a means to integrate the self and move us from insecurity to security: “The importance of spiritual development is now acknowledged by many researchers and respected clinicians as one of the most important lenses through which we should view our lives.” What if God’s fundamental orientation toward his entire creation (including humans) was one of deep, compassionate affection and intense interest in its well-being (Psalm 139)?

The great myth of modernity as it applies to neuroscience is that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We can attain ultimate mindful peacefulness, and by extension, cultural utopia without an Ultimate Other to save us from ourselves. The ongoing terrorism, global warming, mounting third world debt, along with our own proclivity for insatiable consumption, should quickly awaken us from that daydream. (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 169)
Because loneliness is a significant element of our technological society, it is important to remember that faith involves a deep personal relationship with a very personal God, a triune God of grace. Well-loved author and former Oxford Geographer James Houston (2006) argues strongly that God is the ultimate source of our very personhood, that the essential personal dimension of life is more fundamental than the scientific or technological. He is internationally respected for his profound work in this arena. He founded Regent College in 1970 to complement the best of academic study at UBC.

We must remember that it is only a personal, loving God who can be asked for an answer to evil and suffering, (Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, 2000) or who has enough depth and history with the human condition to field the toughest questions of ultimate meaning (final causes). A cold universe of power and forces cannot answer us and show us our identity (D.S. Long, 2009) The crisis of the late modern world is due in large part to its theological amnesia, a fragmented and twisted (broken) memory of God. God did not die on the day we stopped believing in a personal deity. Genuine love did not die with the arrival of the carnival of nihilism; it is a river that runs too deep for that. In fact, a personal relationship with God has helped millions confront the tortured reality of inner demons (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous) as well as the challenging reality of an imperfect and often unjust world.

Who is on trial really? Is it God, or should it be us, the brilliant, enlightened late moderns? It might be we who need to rethink our contemporary nihilist ideology of the aesthetic (Oxford's Terry Eagleton, 1990) and humbly give account to a higher power and find hope in community with accountability, support and mentoring. It may be we who need to recover a healthier understanding of freedom, which is connected to the good and to responsibility. As we noted in our PhD research into the Post-Romantic tradition of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Foucault, the aesthetic has been employed to justify violence, cruelty and intense narcissism (see below, section 5). Do we allow Nietzsche the last word about the last man? We think not.

Is it not a good time to re-examine the philosophical and cultural black hole into which this philosophical tradition has tended to lead us? Like Shakespeare's play Macbeth, we are often lead through the streets humiliated by a black vision of history, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Have some of our late modern philosophies defeated us, deflated us, boxed us in, deconstructed too much, leaving us in a state of cosmic doubt? The giddy thrill of critiquing culture in one’s fourth year history honor’s class can soon turn to the sting of despair in the realization that I myself mean nothing. I am broken and unnecessary. That’s a self-stultifying dead end. Now we see how the cynicism game we are playing turns against us. The challenge or tension of love and taking responsibility sets up a counter-perspective. Really, it is grand refusal of cynicism. See more thought on agape love in section 8.

Next, we turn to a rethinking of our view of humans as species, our anthropology. Our protest has raised the question of love for examination. Now we look at humankind itself.
3. Nihilism is Not the Final Word: Our Anthropology Needs Re-evaluation

The death of meaning is ironically connected to the displacement of God, entailing the substitution of self at the center of the universe. Who do we think we are? Often seen as the apex of evolution, humans are assumed to be getting progressively smarter and better in every way. We’ve made it to the moon; we have eyes into deep space; we work at the level of galaxies and nanoparticles and have developed 3D printers and the world-wide web. We’re feeling pretty good about our accomplishments. This common popular optimistic (even utopian) assumption is due for some serious scrutiny in light of historical experience. We also need an intense, reflective review of the darker side of the human soul, the human condition—including tendencies to destroy life, exploit, oppress, pollute, ravage, dominate and over-consume. A simple liberation narrative that accentuates mankind’s potential, celebrating choice as the prime imperative will not suffice. A dialectic look at the human species gives us a more accurate and honest perspective.

Humans are certainly capable both of great good and great evil, benevolence and terrorism, as the twentieth century wars and the 9/11 events in New York City illustrate in grave detail. They are neither totally good nor totally evil, but a mixture of mystic and mutt, stargazer and genocidal demigod, liberator and oppressor, philanthropist and greed monger. Indeed we are a *mixed-breed*. Brilliance, creativity, charm and compassion fight it out with deceit, selfishness, violence and cruelty. Germany for instance produced both the great musical works of Beethoven and Mozart and the aggressive colonizer Hitler, sophisticated disease-fighting medical technology and horrific eugenics. Our sophisticated technologies are used for both creative and destructive purposes. The honest nihilist wisely admits that we have found the enemy, and *the enemy is us*. We are all part of the problem of evil and suffering; we are all broken to some degree and in need of healing. We all have this dark side (Carl Jung). None of us do the best that we are able, or lives up to personal ideals or standards. We all cheat at some level, and are very skilled in the ruse, as well as clever self-interest and self-justification. We can all practice the most egregious self-righteousness at times as we bully others to maintain our status, wealth or power. Those who are wealthy or power can hire spin-doctors to manufacture their public image through propaganda.

Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn realized it in a powerful way on his rotting prison straw as captured in his book *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 to 1956*.

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unuprooted small corner of evil. Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

One of the root causes of cynicism is inflated, unrealistic expectations of others (a skewed or one-sided anthropology). At one end, we expect such great things of each other; at the other we are devastated by disappointment as a significant other fails us. Our
world crashes and we give up on humanity in general. In a marriage, the ideal marriage in our minds must give way to the real possibility where both members realize they are broken at some level and carry baggage from their upbringing and their addictions.

Need we naively debate whether humans are essentially good or essentially evil? We are both, a virtual chimera. Humans urgently need this deep, realistic truth about themselves. Otherwise they can never fully flourish, go deep, live well, never reckon with or escape their own dark, death-dealing tendencies. They will continue to hide from themselves and project a false image. Others are finite, needy, and needing healing just like us. They will fail us at times and delightfully surprise us as well. In fact, we all need redemption, transformation. We need not remain a total mystery to ourselves.

Ancient Saint Macarius writes:

The heart itself is but a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and also lions. There are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. But there too is God, the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace—all things are there.

The cynical response is not fair to other people and not honest enough about our own woundedness; it will often tend to victimize the Other (René Girard) and project personal evil onto other races, gender, social castes, or professional groups. It will treat them with coercion and contempt; this victim concern has been twisted says Girard (2002, p. 177); it has often been turned against God, Judaism and Christianity to claim that religion is the major source of violence, rather than the protector of the victims. Currently, Christianity calculates as the preferred scapegoat among certain intellectual elites.

Alternatively, perhaps we can learn from the existential courage and honesty of Canada's artist and mass culture pundit Douglas Coupland.

Now here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again ... My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. (D. Coupland, 1994, p. 359)

Many scholars agree. They claim that multitudes of people in the developed world have lost their way and are living on half a story. Secular humanism is philosophically running out of gas, becoming tired. People need to rediscover a rootedness to life, a ground for meaning, a reliable tradition, if you will, a ground of being. They require a new embededness in something deeper and more meaningful. They need to reacquaint themselves with the rich Christian heritage that helped shape positive Western values that we cherish (Jens Zimmermann, Brad Gregory, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, David Bentley Hart, John Milbank, Oliver O'Donovan).
Here’s David Bentley Hart’s attempt to recover a better picture of history in the West.

Indeed Christianity was complicit in the death of antiquity, and in the birth of modernity, not because it was an accomplice of the latter, but because it, alone in the history of the West, constituted a rejection of and alternative to nihilism’s despair, violence, and idolatry of power; as such, Christianity shattered the imposing and enchanting facade behind which nihilism once hid, and thereby, inadvertently, called it forth into the open. (D. B. Hart, *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments*)

Compassion, pity, and charity, as we understand and cherish them, are not objects found in nature, like trees or butterflies or academic philosophers, but are historically contingent conventions of belief and practice, formed by cultural convictions that need not have arisen at all … shaped by Christianity’s moral premises: the ideals of justice for the oppressed, … the doctrine of God’s universal love, its exaltation of forgiveness over condemnation. (D.B. Hart, 2009, p. 17).

Of course, some fulfillment can be had in accomplishing a great work of art or winning a Nobel Prize in science, writing a good book, or winning the hundred-meter dash at the Olympics. Perhaps this urgent quest for meaning and significance is highlighted in the extremes to which people will go to get themselves in the Guinness World Book of Records. But ultimately, meaning must be grounded in a higher power, a personal God, a living and life-giving, infinite source of meaning. Reason itself does not make sense outside of this larger framework.

Ultimately, one must recognize a transcendent dimension or horizon to meaning. Hope which is rooted in God is not false hope, superstition or wishful thinking, but substantive and eminently sustainable. There is an honest admission of the *sensus divinitatis* in the deathbed words of Parisian *grand pensée*, Jean Paul Sartre:

> Even if one does not believe in God, there are elements of the idea of God that remain in us.... As for me, I don’t see myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth. In short, as a being that could, it seems, come only from a creator; and this idea of a creating hand that created me refers me back to God. Naturally this is not a clear, exact idea that I set in motion every time I think of myself. It contradicts many of my other ideas; but it is there, floating vaguely. And when I think of myself I often think rather in this way, for wont of being able to think otherwise. (Simone de Beauvoir, "A Conversation About Death and God," Harper’s magazine, February 1984)

The father of atheistic existentialism (highlighting choice) admits this inner voice about a meaning from beyond our immanent frame. He is the one who also said after the mayhem caused by two world wars, “man is an empty bubble on the sea of nothingness.”

The Easter Celebration reminds us of something absolutely vital at the core of our being. It is a reversal on nihilism, a paradigm shift on secular loss of meaning. The risen Jesus is the Ultimate Word, the last word (*logos*)! Author Andy Crouch says it powerfully:

> Indeed one of the most dramatic cultural effects of the resurrection is the transformation of that heinous cultural artifact known as a cross. An instrument of domination and condemnation becomes a symbol of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed; an alternative culture where grace and forgiveness are the last word …. The cross, the worst that culture can do, is transformed into a sign of the kingdom of God--the realm of forgiveness, mercy, love and indestructible life. (A. Crouch, 2008, p. 146)
Honesty will tell us that we are not perfect, but that we are loved, and therefore do no have to fake it. Indeed, many of us long for a means to realize existential forgiveness. Hope starts with a critical self-evaluation. There will be more discussion on the benefits of a re-examined anthropology in sections 5 and again in section 10.
4. Nihilism is Not the Last Word: It Fails to Honestly Engage Evil and Suffering

The problem of evil and suffering presents one of the toughest phenomena (to make sense of) for people of all worldview positions. It is an intense problematic. Yet, it can also be our teacher, promoting moral growth and discovery of meaning, as we dig deeper into the human condition. It is worthy of the wrestling, within the appropriate moral horizon.

Following the previous discussion, interpretation is a critical factor here. A bitter response to personal tragedy or an abusive relationship easily develops: “Trust no one!” can become our slogan. If a trusted friend, colleague or relative committed the unseemly act, the hurt individual can opt for retreat and a refusal to ever trust again. A recent prayer said it all: “Help me to learn to trust that there are some good people out there.” This person has been hurt a lot.

Social media “friends” can turn on us in an instant and maliciously expose our secret to a billion people. This can be shocking and personally devastating. One's emotions disengage and commitments can become ever so tentative, nervous and cautious. It could also be a strong temptation for a person who has had a life-altering injury, like a severed spinal cord or serious war injury or PTSD as in the case of Romeo Dallaire from his Rwanda experience. The problem of coping is especially true of someone who was abused as a child by a parent, teacher, or coach in the most vulnerable stage of innocence. The emotional scars are carried well into adult life and can be debilitating. Tragedy like this can break our narrative, and our spirit, dash our hopes and dreams. We die inside.

People respond differently to hurt and tragedy as we learn from our great works of art such as Victor Hugo's classic Les Miserables. One person will write a poem or song; another will start a foundation to help the disenfranchised or orphans, rescue child soldiers. And yet others will settle for resentment and rage against God, parent, the system or the regime. The latter tends to demonize others or institutions. They go inside and stew their hatred, and often become an abuser in their own right. A mad cycle perpetuates itself. This is often the crucible in which cynics, rebels, career criminals, oppressive leaders and suicide bombers are shaped. Most dictators fit the profile of being abused as a child and hating their parents.

Such a response is quite understandable, but it is not a solution, nor does it offer a successful direction of healing. We believe that the trauma is much accentuated and intensified if one has nothing transcendent to hold onto, no advocacy or community to process the pain with, or if one espouses Nihilism as a stance on the world. Philosophical Nihilism can harden one’s resentment. Such a stance gives up on grace itself, promoting a kind of existential death, a death of meaning and human purpose. We question this hermeneutic as self-defeating; it gives up on hope.

As an alternative, delightful Anglican writer Robert Farrar Capon speaks about the need for advocacy in An Offering of Uncles. He notes that we all need someone trustworthy other than our parent to confide in, to help us grow up, grow through our pain and confusion—an uncle or auntie. Most people begin to see imperfections in their parents in their mid teens, if not before. Cynicism can suddenly blind an adolescent to any good in
adults. At its worst, cynicism projects the problems and insecurities of the teenager onto others or the world. The great tendency is to desire distance from evil behavior or a narcissistic personality (Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*). Trusted friends often are the only solace in this painful space. Counseling may be required to address the imbalance and the fractured self, but a healthy person cannot reside long in that space of resentment without serious psychic damage. It is a toxic, cancerous soil. An advocate like an uncle may help.

We are alerted to this danger by brilliant psychiatrist, Dr. Scott Peck famous for his *Road Less Travelled; People of the Lie; and A Different Drum*. He points out that most human neuroses start with the refusal to face the hard realities of life, to deal with pain and brokenness in healthy ways. Mental health comes from “facing reality at all costs.” Most mental illness starts with a refusal to accept and go through one's pain, an escape into fantasy of some sort, a refusal to grapple with the complexity of life and with difficult relationships. We need to own our pain and work through it; avoidance leads to counter-productive side effects such as anorexia, anxiety or even depression. Scott Cairns in *The End of Suffering: Finding Purpose in Pain* offers some assistance along the journey.

Like most people I, too, have been blindsided by personal grief now and again over the years. And I have an increasingly keen sense that, wherever I am, someone nearby is suffering now. For that reason, I lately have settled in to mull the matter over, gathering my troubled wits to undertake a difficult essay, more like what we used to call an assay, really--an earnest inquiry. I am thinking of it just now as a study in suffering, by which I hope to find some sense in affliction, hoping--just as I have come to hope about experience in general--to make something of it.

We have to find that deeper honesty about our brokenness, and face the pain and pollution we also contribute to society and the violence we perpetrate upon creation. The cynic, in the quest to avoid more pain, settles for the emotional cancer of bitterness and resentment. Cynicism is a sickness, a tricky (even dangerous) defense mechanism to protect oneself against further and deeper hurt. Worldview author James Sire warns: "The strands of epistemological, metaphysical and ethical nihilism weave together to make a rope long enough and strong enough to hang a whole culture." It is properly seen as an abyss, a spiritual *black hole*.

Evil and suffering need not crush us, but we will need a worldview big enough and sophisticated enough to handle it fruitfully, a proper horizon of meaning to deal with the complexity of our emotions, our ambivalence, our personal tragedy. Peter Kreeft talks about this in the opening chapter of his profound book *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Some worldviews, he claims, are useless and even harmful, inviting yet more victimization. But courage and conviction are required to face off with evil and work through our pain. Miroslav Volf’s award-wining book (1996) *Exclusion and Embrace* wrestles with the challenging dynamics of will-to-power and victimization. He aims to break the cycle and disempower the abuser, and de-victimize the victim. He is a profound thinker, deeply familiar with the racism, revenge and violence in the Balkan states.

Austrian Psychologist Victor Frankl revealed some profound human insights from his experience at the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. The survivors were those who were able to find meaning in their suffering and maintain a strong view of the future (hope of a resolution), a spouse back home, a bigger purpose or frame to
their lives. They recognized the insanity of their situation, but refused to become a terminal victim. The others fell under the weight of the evil games of the guards, lowered themselves to the level of animals and died miserably. One freedom that Frankl observed amidst the squalor stood out: the survivors held tight to their freedom to choose their attitude to the terrible circumstances, the freedom to remain human despite the horrible circumstances. Some of them gave their last crust of bread to a friend to maintain their compassion, their humanity. Frankl himself held on to his goal to write a book on Logotherapy, rooted in the human psychic need for meaning. He suggests that we are hard wired to seek for meaning.

As a group of students from Ontario, we once visited the museum of the Dachau death camp on a trip through Europe. We took the time to let the tragedy of this terrible Western nightmare sink in, rattle the soul and make us weep over this narrative of Nihilism and genocide, this crushing of the weak and the vulnerable, this deep darkness of modernity. Prisoners here had bee thrust into an infinity of meaninglessness and brutality. Though scientifically well managed and well documented, it was the death of culture for millions. The contrast with the astoundingly beautiful Munich next door was striking. A recent trip revealed that continental Europe has long been host to a combination of tragedy and triumph, intense creativity and mass destruction, scientific breakthroughs and bloody wars (some lasting 30 years).

On the other hand, we have a powerful illustration of the choices we face today in the play, Les Miserables, by French playwright Victor Hugo. Recently, we viewed the movie version. My daughter and her friends love to sing a number of the songs. This story depicts the power of forgiveness to transform the tragic, miserable prison life of Jean Val Jean into a productive life where he in turn acts as a redemptive agent for others. He allows himself to be reinvented in the most amazing way, carrying with him a sincere empathy for others (especially the poor and exploited) who struggle under the machinations of an unjust society in nineteenth century Paris. He adopts the baby girl of a female victim.

The rescued prisoner becomes the rescuer. But there was a crucial moment where he had to choose between bitter hatred and resentment, over against redemption into a life of compassion and wholeness. The thing that brought him the greatest personal suffering in the end freed him from himself in a way that he never imagined. He became a new man. It was not an easy decision. His choice of this stance towards the world is contrasted by the virile vengeance of policeman Javert who is only concerned to hunt down Jean Val Jean over a decade or more, punish and oppress him further for stealing a loaf of bread. In the end, Javert commits suicide because he cannot cope with a world where forgiveness is an option. He has become a true cynic, a consistent Nihilist. His heart died; there is no space for compassion, mercy or forgiveness in his world. He self-destructs because of resentment, even though given several opportunities to change. The picture painted of these two options are staggering in their implications and their life instruction. Many of us face such a crossroads within our own context.

Fast forward to the present. Recently, we were talking with the father of a current political science student. He was recalling that his son was becoming disillusioned with
the fact that so many fellow humanities students did not care about the Big Life Questions anymore. They were settling for academic cynicism allowing themselves and their academic work to be trivialized. Therefore he transferred to philosophy hoping to fair better. This is too common today as students’ big dreams of education and its life-enhancing power are dashed. They feed on the cynicism of disenchanted professors.

J.I. Packer & Thomas Howard wrote about this in their constructive vision Christianity: the True Humanism.

Cynicism is the disposition to believe that truth-claims cannot ever be trusted, that virtue, however apparent, is never real, and that hopelessness is the only real wisdom. As a state of mind, it is a child of disappointment.

Is it because we are mentored by Nietzsche’s disciples that we are to give up discernment and embrace good and evil on equal terms? Have we lost track of a good or great cause worth studying and fighting for, or an evil worth curbing and mitigating? Have we lost any philosophical foundation from which to discern truth from fiction, virtue from vice? This would entail a bigger tragedy of the soul, a lostness. Nietzsche himself worried that we would become insects or lose all culture, all value in the West. Who has cannibalized these young minds and hearts? Who stole their adolescent dreams of a better world? Where is the constructive academic traction today?

We want to protest! It is time to wake up from our slumber. Nihilism will not carry the future; it is deaf to our pain and suffering; it has no discernment for good and evil or justice; reason is exploited by will to power; it is a spiritual dead end, which leads to an emptiness of the soul. It creates a void of identity. In a terrible, gut wrenching illustration of this, Joseph Goebbels and his wife murdered their own young children with suicide pills in the Hitler’s Berlin bunker as World War II was coming to the end; they saw no future outside of their false dream of National Socialism and it had come to an end. They along with Hitler committed suicide and had their bodies burned. Ashes for their bodies and ashes of an immense trashing of Europe was the end product of their vision. They showed us that we had entered a Dark Moral Age of the European Enlightenment in the twentieth century, an ideology of death (thanatos writ large).

Next we turn to an extension of our anthropological critique in late modernity. Many today are constructivists, believing there is nothing essential about human beings. They enjoy inventing and re-inventing self; they are pioneers of a sort. It is only what we individually decide to input or how they choose their values. This deeply impacts one’s view of morality and personal freedom. The next discussion focuses in on a dialogue between French philosopher Michel Foucault (a constructivist and a nihilist) and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (a Christian who sharply understands both Continental and Anglo-American philosophical cultures). It makes for interesting intellectual fencing.
5. Nihilism is Not the Last Word: A Critique of Foucault's Aesthetic Self-constitution

Poststructuralist Michel Foucault is a late twentieth century disciple of Nietzsche and Heidegger; he does philosophy within an **outlook**, i.e. upon a ‘foundation’ of nihilism. In the third major part of his **oeuvre** he attempts to recover human agency. This discussion is the core of a critical analysis of his constitution of the moral self (ethics of self) in the ethical period. Aesthetics plays a large role in what he calls self-creation, contributing to both positive and negative implications of his aesthetic self-determination. This approach is having a heavy influence in culture today especially in the area of identity politics, but also well beyond that.

How do we become a moral being? A key starting point for grappling with Foucault’s position on the self is with Charles Taylor’s diagnostics of self-constitution contained in his *The Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor, 1991, pp. 65-67, aka *The Ethics of Authenticity*). The larger version of Taylor’s analysis is in his 1989 tome *Sources of the Self*. The chart below is employed in this argument as a criteria grid to begin the examination of the robustness of Foucault's concept of **aesthetic** moral self-constitution, otherwise known as the ‘art of self’ or aesthetics of existence. The personal vision is to make of one’s life a work of art. The chart highlights what is both present and absent in Foucault’s radical viewpoint, which is rooted in an ontology of freedom: radical freedom is his starting assumption. This critique leads us on a trajectory of understanding some of the forces that shape identity in late modernity, and also enriching our awareness of the richest dimensions of the self. We will feel the tensions and hopefully think freshly about the subject by the end.

Taylor begins by agreeing with Foucault that, in the West, one is self-consciously involved in one’s self-development, and that one’s identity, one’s spirituality and one’s moral self are intimately entwined. Self-betterment is one major reason that people take part in higher education. Both philosophers are also critical of a cultural over-emphasis on mere scientific (analytical) definitions of the self within the tradition of early modernity (and scientism), a disengaged subject controlling the world, defining its value, for itself, by itself. This was articulated in the opening section of this project under the title of the epistemological approach to seeing. Taylor, unlike Foucault, does not operate within a nihilist hermeneutical frame. Perhaps he can assist us in a recovery and re-integration process: i.e. our potential identity construct.

Their debate begins when one asks who and what else is involved in one’s shaping of the self. In Taylor’s analysis, there are five significant criteria, divided into categories A and B, indicators of the shape of one’s own moral self-constitution. It is a chart that is respectful of the plurality of contemporary approaches. He suggests that all five elements tend to be involved, with different weight, in moral identity development. We believe that these criteria can help us to discern and negotiate the nuances of the identity crises of our day.
Taylor’s Moral Self-Construction Diagnostics

Category A (Creativity)

(i) Creation and construction (as well as discovery) of the self.

(ii) Pursuit of originality in one’s self-crafting.

(iii) Opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what one recognizes as morality, or the moral order.

Category B (Social and Moral Accountability)

(i) Openness to horizons of significance prevents one’s self-creation from losing the background that can save it from insignificance and trivialization (self-destruction of meaning).

(ii) Self-definition needs to be developed in dialogue with significant Others, that is, fellow moral interlocutors within a community and a narrative. (Taylor, 1991, pp. 65, 66)

This chart is rooted in Taylor’s moral ontology of the good, which we elaborate in Section 6, but contains a broader application. While admitting the strong impact of the Post-Romantic Turn in philosophy (in which Foucault and other poststructuralists such as Schopenhauer and Baudelaire are significant players), Taylor understands the existence and currency of the language of self-construction. This is not lost on graduate students in the field of education, where self-construction is a major thematic. He takes Foucault seriously, even though he disagrees with him on certain key emphases. Taylor does not reject the Romantic and Post-Romantic traditions out of hand; he is a unique cross between a Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. But he does bring a critical reflection to bear on both traditions, especially to some of their extreme positions. He includes the hermeneutical stream of Western philosophy in his critical analysis of culture.

Taylor does not concede the legitimacy of just any form of self-construction, a view that puts him into a significant tension with Foucault’s perspective on the self. Referring back to the chart above, his concern with Foucault is the extreme emphasis that he places on Category A (Creativity), and the near exclusion of an emphasis on Category B (Accountability and Mutuality). This leads to a radical form of individualism, holding the potential for anarchistic tendencies, and potentially reaching into the unsavory Dionysian depths.

Moreover, he contests that Foucault’s radical nominalism, which denies the possibility of self-discovery along with self-creation (Ai). His problem is with what he considers an over-emphasis or skewing of reality. Taylor has a higher stake in (a higher value on) certain human and natural (even moral) given than Foucault. Taylor is not a nominalist, but a falsifiable moral realist. Briefly put, this means that he recognizes both an objective and a subjective component (pole) in moral self-constitution, and does not
allow ethics to be reduced to either extreme, especially to radical subjectivization of morality. The term ‘falsifiable moral realist’ is coined by Ruth Abbey (Charles Taylor, 2000) a Taylor specialist and archivist.

Furthermore, Taylor questions the merits and overall legitimacy of category (Aiii), that self-constitution should automatically by definition involve denial of the moral rules of society—the anarchic stance. He does not have an inherent bias against social norms, but nor is he an uncritical social conventionalist. Taylor (1991, p. 63) justifiably asks why aesthetic self-making should necessarily pass through a repudiation of the moral order. Also, why are all moral regimes and all humanisms written off so easily (perhaps even cynically) by Foucault? Finally, his concern with Foucault is the inherent denial of the significance of category (Bi) and (Bii), including the idea of moral horizons and the more social/dialogical dimension of self-making. This is a critical oversight that concerns Taylor deeply. The whole first section of Sources of the Self (C. Taylor, 1989) deals with the communal and narrative aspects of moral self-constitution. Moral development is more dialogical and communal for Taylor than for Foucault. Foucault wants to pry the self loose from the structures of institutions, in order to attain even more freedom.

Foucault’s idea of moral self-constitution is hyper-individualistic. Taylor, as a more communitarian thinker, brings a fresh set of concerns to the table of discussion on the self. He suggests that,

What must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other (e.g. A over B) ... That is what trendy doctrines of “deconstruction” involve today ... stress (Ai) the constructive, creative nature of our expressive languages, while altogether forgetting (Bi). They capture the more extreme forms of (Aiii), the amoralism of creativity ... while forgetting (Bii), its dialogical setting, which binds us to others ... These thinkers buy into the background outlook of authenticity, for instance in their understanding of the creative, self-constitutive powers of language ... while ignoring some of its essential constituents. (Taylor, 1991, pp. 66, 67)

Taylor’s concern is that Foucault makes such a reductionistic move, ignoring as he does certain key or important constituents of self-articulation, such as the dynamics of Category B (Accountability). By abolishing all ‘extra-self’ horizons of significance, and demoting the significance of dialogue with other moral interlocutors, morality can become quite narrowly focused on self alone: self-expression, self-determination, self-invention, and self-justification. It can become a virtual monologue, an abstract self-projection of one’s values onto the world, rather than a source of communal conversation, cooperation and personal responsibility for the Other. This social embeddedness is a crucial concern for contemporary moral dialogue. The mobility of people, fragmentation of families and the loss of roots is part of the crisis of self we experience.

For Foucault and his concept Care of Self, the clear weight of bias in his discourse on subjectivity is towards a radical autonomy, not construction as part of a communal dialogue, nor is it an ethics for society. It is an ethics of the individual in rebellion against societal controls and norms (anti-nomian). This tends to skew Foucault’s theory of the moral self towards self-interest, or even narcissism (his colleague at College de France Pierre Hadot called it Dandyism). James Houston writes this about the aesthete:
It is instinctual to be “aesthetic”—that is to live on the surface of things. We need to die away from the aesthetic stage in which we exhibit ourselves like Hollywood stars — showing off our bodies, our intelligence, our accomplishments and our passion for happiness and living impatiently in quest of instant gratification. No wonder such worldly aesthetes have such fragile and brittle identities, fostered by narcissistic personalities in a narcissistic culture. (J.M. Houston, 2006, p. 44)

According to Foucault, ethics means that the self studies the power relations within the social matrix, abstracts itself from the problematized social matrix, rethinks itself, and then imposes the newly invented self combatively onto society. "The understanding of value as something created gives the individual a sense of freedom and power." (Taylor, 1991, p. 67). Foucault attempts to deal with aesthetic self-constitution issue through his strong emphasis on the creative, constructive imagination. His strong emphasis on the aesthetic hermeneutic of self follows Nietzsche, the great aesthetic philosopher. Terry Eagleton in The Ideology of the Aesthetic (1990) has a substantial critique of both Foucault and Nietzsche in this regard. We find it very instructive background to our present discussion.

For Foucault, the language of a transcendent good is repressed in self-making, in favour of the language of the creative imagination and radical individual self-articulation—invention of self. There can be real assertive force in this self-articulation as we see in contemporary politics and business leadership. The grammar of the good is rethought and reconfigured in terms of the artistic self. It is a vital insight that self and its expression are taken as the proximate source of the good and the true. Some call this stance expressivism.

The sources of the self, to use Taylor’s language, are assumed to be contained within the creative self. One might explore what others (ancient and modern) are doing in their self-creation, but it is up to the individual to invent a new self, something original. Once this is realized, suggests Foucault, individual freedom and power will emerge, over against any societal or institutional power/knowledge regime. The attempt here is to break truth free from power. Unlike other conceptions of transcendent moral sources in reason, nature or God, the Post-Romantic Foucault focuses on sources of the self within the self, in the register of moral self-empowerment and freedom of expression, a continual ongoing re-invention of self and assertion of its ‘artistic freedom’. The beautiful trumps the good in a transvaluation of values. For some, this is not an easy concept to grasp.

Such a perception of sources makes it possible to relativize, even marginalize the Other and the social world. This gives one power over the Other and the world, a power which could easily be abused by such a subject and lead to abuse or even self-justified violence. One could become anti-social or sociopathic. At the very least, it decreases vulnerability and accountability to the Other (empathy being a key dimension of effectual ethics within human relations). This is especially acute given Foucault’s emphasis on the kind of accountability that is merely a self-reflexive phenomenon, a responsibility to care for self first, love self as a first priority above all else. If it is my life that is the work of art, then I (and my reflexive relationship with myself) become the central focus of ethics.
This posture produces a radical self-determining form of freedom that must give us pause (Jean Bethke Elshtain). Significance can be conferred by choice, by making my life a constant exercise in freedom or self-assertion in the name of becoming a work of art. The one remaining virtue is choice itself, a phenomenon of late modernity and nihilism that we noted earlier. The kinder side of this, says Taylor, is that this is taken as support for the demands of difference (to fight oppression or marginalization as a minority voice).

Overall, it often unfortunately pushes towards a dangerous atomization and fragmentation of self and society—hyper-pluralism or radical celebration of difference (Brad Gregory, The Unintended Reformation). It postures the self in ongoing conflict with society. Thus we must think critically about the quality of moral self-constitution within its larger horizon of significance: human and divine. In A Secular Age (2007, p. 559), Taylor writes, "There is no priority of the individual's sense of self over society: our most primordial identity is as a new player being inducted in an old game." This critical analysis of individual power and self-expression is also dealt with by author Andy Crouch (2013) in his recent book Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power. He shows how the Apple Computer genius Steve Jobs was also a psychopath in his relationships; he did not always manage power well.

**Characteristics of the Post-Romantic Outlook:** Foucault gets his paradigm of the moral self (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 434-55) from the Post-Romantic tradition. This reveals how the aesthetic worldview of Foucault rethinks the moral. Key Post-Romantic players include: Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Foucault. Here below are the parameters.

1. Art is superior to morality, and sees itself in conflict with the social moral order.

2. Humans live in a chaotic or fallen natural and social world, rooted in chaos and the will to power. One can take an affirmative stance towards the world through seeing it as beautiful—seeing the world through an aesthetic lens. This is the only remaining basis for its justification, or attempt towards wholeness, the attempt to rescue some kind of meaning (however ephemeral).

3. Being itself is not good as such, nor is human being per se taken as good. It is in need of a make-over.

4. Hope resides in a strong belief in the power of the creative imagination to transfigure or transform the world and the self, or to reveal it afresh as beautiful.

5. Language is a key means of changing the world, or at least the way one sees the world; it is key to one's poetic self-expression, and a re-writing of the self.

6. This tends to result in an aesthetic amorality, a move beyond good and evil, an embrace or affirmation of violence and cruelty (Baudelaire) as well as patience and care. There is no logical or moral distinction (hierarchy) between a host of possible values which contradict each other.
Foucault would agree with Taylor’s placement of his project in the twentieth century cultural transition called the Post-Romantic Turn (Taylor, 1989, pp. 434-455). The expressivism of this tradition gives a higher, even perhaps a normative significance to the aesthetic culture sphere, and opens a full challenge to the moral culture sphere (Taylor, 1991, p. 63). Foucault clearly wishes to transcend the code-morality of Old Europe, with its universal intent towards normalization, via a new morality of the evolving ethics of the autonomous, artistic self. It is similar in sentiment to the avant-garde in modern art (Dada). The pressing question is whether Foucault's project of recovering the self is ironically captive to a totalizing impulse, the aestheticization of the moral. It would seem to be the case. Does it also become an ideology of the aesthetic which can be easily manipulated by higher or lower motivations? The lack of or despising of moral infrastructure is a major concern.

There is a strong tendency in Foucault to celebrate the individual’s own powers to construct and interpret reality in a context shaped by immanence and the finite (the immanent fram), and to deny the legitimacy of any binding moral horizon or moral culture outside or above the self. This is essential to his hermeneutic of the self articulated by Foucault and other poststructuralists. Taylor sees the picture this way.

Foucault’s spiritual profile: an even higher estimate of the unrestricted powers of the imagination than the Romantics had, and hence a celebration of those powers ... This subjectivism of self-celebration is a standard temptation in a culture which exalts freedom and puts such value on the creative imagination. (Taylor, 1989, pp. 489, 490)

According to this sentiment, all values are welcome to the table of open hospitality (moral leveling). In Foucault's moral ontology of aesthetic freedom (which is no ontology after all), there is no hierarchy of various goods. This is a key problematic of his position. The consequence is that nothing appears to be of ultimate value; nothing is better or worse than anything else. Everything is flattened and the effect is a trivialization of higher values—all becomes banal. Virtues and vices, good and evil are leveled and reduced to an individual’s stylization of self (lifestyle). Freedom of choice of one’s values is essential for Foucault; nothing transcends individual choice. It is a fundamental agape substitute as the ultimate good.

Oxford culture philosopher Lois McNay (1994) values some of Foucault's insights, but on this point, she sees a hole in his ethics that one could drive a large truck through. He may understand power relations and sexual stereotypes, but he leaves women vulnerable and without rights protection in the end. The subjectivization of ethics has an ironic way of disintegrating individual rights. There is a sting in this scorpion’s tail. Justice for the weak and downtrodden is a far reach from his solipsistic ethics. One's individually chosen values remain, with the freedom to either cherish and champion them or discard them like an old pair of shoes. There remains a stark lack of social accountability and maturity in this Dionysian approach to ethics.

It is ethics as self-assertive politics; one posits and then promotes one’s values in the name of style, poetics, art or freedom of expression. This is a Nietzschean embrace of it all in the name of beauty. There remains no higher or lower morality, no higher or lower
marks of authenticity in Foucault; choice of one's own individual and creative spiritual path is a primal imperative. All moralities are just expressions of the self, all self-authorized, legitimate in and of themselves.

Beauty is a satisfaction for itself ... gives its own intrinsic fulfilment. It’s goal is internal.... Aesthetic wholeness is an independent goal with its own telos, its own form of goodness and satisfaction" (C. Taylor, 1991, pp. 64, 65).

Taylor makes an astute connection between Nietzsche’s nihilism (his transvaluation of all values) and Foucault on the issue of the art of ethics. This is also the seductive attraction of his views to many late moderns. Note the twenty-first century culture driver insights of Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell in The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement (Free Press, 2009) on this very subject. It could easily implode into a raw quest for money, sex and power. It can be a booster of a false self.

It is here that one recognizes that Foucault’s project of the recovery of the subjective agency within the third part of his oeuvre, is threatened by a loss of meaning or self-trivialization. It sets up a potential fall into a fatal and tragic nihilism, with self imploding in upon itself in endless self-reflexivity, without a broader horizon of significance and the recognition by the Other. On one hand, Foucault sought to escape nihilism of power-knowledge regimes through the invention of the aesthetic self. On the other, his project is in grave danger of running out of gasoline and imploding into nihilism (a jaded existence).

Taylor notes that, in this Post-Romantic philosophical turn, there is a tendency to legitimate action and ethical behaviour according to beauty rather than by its inherent good. One could even justify destructive, cruel and oppressive behaviour on these terms, as do will-to-power dictators like Syria’s Assad every day.

What in the universe commands our affirmation, when we have overcome the all-too-human, is not properly called its goodness but comes closer to being its beauty.... Part of the heroism of the Nietzschean superman is that he can rise beyond the moral, beyond the concern with the good, and manage in spite of suffering and disorder and the absence of all justice to respond to something like the beauty of it all. (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 454)

There exists a kind of happy lunacy in this approach to ethics. The interpretative lens of goodness is exchanged for the lens of the beautiful, or as in Foucault’s case, the maximization of pleasure. The beauty of it all for Post-Romantics makes all things tolerable, perhaps dangerously so, thereby undermining healthy relationships and commitments, and problematizing ethics itself. If Foucault’s ethics as artistic life expression (think Oscar Wilde) is passed through such a repudiation of the moral, any socially empowering moral principle is recognized and yet demoted in favour of the individual’s controlled agenda over the self.

This produces a distortion of reality (shrinking) and a distortion of self. A prestigious place is given to one’s own inner powers of construing, imagining or interpreting the world, and making over of one's self. One doesn’t have to look far in the pop music industry to see that this is what occurs (e.g. Michael Jackson or Madona). It is recognized
that this is ambitious indeed and not for the faint of heart. It calls into question anything like human nature or specific gender or race. Everything comes down to self-construction.

Self emerges as the creator, *stylizer* and *valorizer* of its own individual values. Is this not what we have in Russian leader Vladimir Putin, obsessed with good television coverage? The danger of much politics today is that things can devolve into a politics of self-interest, ignoring justice for the Other or using the Other instrumentally for one’s own self-interest. Mocking or crushing the other is fair game in such politics.

Taylor rigorously challenges this radical individualism and over-emphasis on the creativity side of self-interpretation in Foucault’s third project.

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order that matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. (C. Taylor, 1991, pp. 40-41)

Trivialization of self and one’s life-world is endemic on the road to nihilism. We should now be alert to the fact that the language of values and the language of aesthetics are closely entwined (Weber and Foucault are philosophically close on this point). The language of values emerges out of an intellectual outlook of nihilism (Nietzsche is introduced via Weber to North America), and therefore should be managed circumspectly. It can be dangerous or explosive, even self-destructive. From whence comes a value? Why is compassion better or worse than violence or cruelty? Value, according to Foucault, is what the *creator of self* values, that is, the self and no one else. This is a highly questionable stance towards society and seems quite egoistic, even possibly anarchistic and fragmentary—a breakdown in trust and predictability in relationships.

With Foucault, the individual self as agent has an awesome (perhaps crushing) responsibility as creator of all values. The tendency today is to raid various traditions and religions for an eclectic variety of such values. The individual self’s will to choose, the will to become, is of paramount importance.

Struck by the sense that we stand before a normative abyss, that this blind, deaf, silent universe offers no guidance whatever; we can experience an exhilarating challenge, which inspires us, which can even awaken a sense of strange beauty of this alien universe, in the face of which we stake our claim as legislators of meaning. (C. Taylor, 2007, p. 580-581)

The condition of the self-reinvention in Foucault works off the assumption of moral nihilism, and yet also assumes a strong will to self-empowerment, sentiments that are often contradictory. It is nihilism with a strong quest for freedom and creativity in its *uber* radical subjectivity. It can lead to a deep, growing cynicism, appealing to and attracting some of the darkest human motives and behaviours.
Unfortunately, it fails to meet Taylor’s criteria of the higher versions of the authentic quest for self-construction concerning the larger historical and social horizons of the self. It entails vulnerability to loss of meaning, and even possibly a surprising existential trap (Kiekegaard) for late moderns. It is definitely not about agape love or seeking shalom or pursuit of the good for its own sake. We propose with Taylor that the quest for meaning and the prospects for a foundation of hope requires that we pay attention to the larger context (horizon) of our lives in order to dig deeper and build sustainability and thickness into our fragile lives. The discussion of recovery of the good to follow offers profound insight into our attempts to identify and locate ourselves in late modernity and saves us from self-trivialization and ultimate loss of self.

If Foucault’s aesthetic morality appears wanting with its gaps, some dark leanings, moral ambivalence, and a tendency towards solipsism and narcissism, what is the alternative? Perhaps we can find substantial answers in Charles Taylor’s recovery of the ancient concept of the good. This is a paramount contribution to current moral discourse. We believe that he offers strategic and critical help for both dialogue and discernment in a hyper-pluralistic age, where cruelty and the absurd are also celebrated, and values are a consumer commodity, traded on the open market and through social media.

Taylor’s argument for moral realism in the first section of his important 1989 tome Sources of the Self is five-fold. This is his contribution to the recovery and reform of moral discourse and his contribution to healthy identity formation. In terms of moral given, he argues that certain perennial features of the self are present irrespective of culture or the way they are expressed or understood. He starts his analysis with the question of how humans operate as moral beings in their actual moral experiences, and how they reflect upon those experiences. So he is interested in praxis as well as moral theory, both the immanent and transcendent dimensions of moral discourse. Beginning with humans and the way they experience morality, he claims that the most plausible explanation of morality is one that takes seriously humans’ perception of the independence of moral goods. The overall paradigm of his moral realism follows. We think it is substantial and worthy of serious consideration.

He does not want to substitute a philosophical abstraction for how people live and think. Firstly, he argues for the ubiquity of moral intuitions and judgments in human experience. These are intuitions that transcend basic human desires for survival, sex, or self-realization. They are also referred to as second-order desires, strong evaluations or qualitative discriminations. We note the important reference to the quality of the will. There must be more than mere choice or self-assertion of one’s values. This concept of second-order desires appeals to the ancient idea of the good, a good which remains interwoven with the self, but transcends the self in significant ways. This avoids the pitfall of pure subjectivism, which is a danger in Foucault’s approach to the moral self.

Secondly, he argues that there is a need for a larger moral picture to facilitate the task of making sense of moral experience (debates, deliberations, decisions and actions). He calls this picture (map) a moral framework or horizon. Each framework is made up of several goods held together in a coherent relationship with one another, producing a moral worldview so to speak; certain goods tend to coalesce. The moral self is in a dialectical relationship with its framework and its constituent goods. It is not a static set of conditions, but rather dynamic and developmental. Thus we observe a hermeneutical (interpretive) aspect of one’s relationship to the good.

Thirdly, he recognizes that there is a key defining good within each moral framework, which he calls the hypergood. The hypergood is the preeminent good and operates as a controlling influence and organizer of the other goods within the framework; it defines its overall character and thus is central to the discussion of the moral self. Confront another
person’s hypergood and you hit something for which they will fight and give you resistance. The hypergood is core to one’s identity and the central focus of this discussion.

Fourthly, Taylor recognizes a narrative and communal texture to the pursuit of the good in moral self-constitution. Humans interpret their lives in narrative and communal terms as they pursue moral goods; these goods give vision and mission to life. This important narrative articulation helps the individual to find a unity amidst the complexity of moral experience and a plurality of goods vying for our attention. The awareness and cultivation of this dimension is a key factor in the establishment of the meaning of a life, the moral growth of the individual, and one’s sense of calling.

Fifthly, Taylor speaks of the sources of the moral or sources of the self, which he refers to as the constitutive good. The constitutive good (a category of moral motivation) gives meaning to and empowers, the hypergood and the other life goods within the moral framework: it acts as a moral driver. It provides the constitutive ground of the worth or value of the life goods, and empowers the individual to live the good life. This is a significant dimension that speaks to our motivation to do and be the good. It connects with both passion and praxis—how the good plays out in relationships. Later in Section 7., we will discuss how the Holy Spirit can fill this role.

Moral identity is interwoven with the pursuit of the good in Taylor’s moral ontology. He discerns these five categories as givens, structural features that are common to the life of all morally healthy human beings. Psychopaths or sociopaths are the exception as they lack the sense of social accountability. These goods are not reducible to choice or preference; they have a transcendent quality to them. Taylor wants to problematize the occlusion or exclusion of such parameters, such qualitative distinctions for moral reasoning, because he believes that within the life of the self, there is a multiplicity of goods to be recognized, acted upon and pursued.

This is all part of the colorful dynamics of moral discourse. Taylor emphasizes the importance of being circumspect about these goods. It is quite an ambitious and challenging proposal, a moral ontology of the self at its best, noblest or most whole. It offers a useful alternative framework for the contemporary dialogue on moral self-constitution and a recovery of moral identity. It allows moral debate to be a rational enterprise; one can talk about the goods that drive one’s world. It also provides a rational mechanism to sort out moral differences in a fair, civil, understanding way.

On this basis, we mount our critique of the idea that freedom can be reduced to a mere matter of the will alone: naked, unqualified, self-justified individual choice. There is so much more to be said. This analysis will promote qualitative discriminations of choice. There is a complexity of having so many goods and the conflicts between some of these emerge at certain moments in life. Taylor cautions us, however, to keep them in play and not to bury them just because there is a situational conflict between two goods. According to this brilliant philosopher of the self, the potential resolution of this dilemma of the contemporary plurality of goods, this tension between goods, comes by way of a
highest good among the *strongly-valued* goods: within the moral framework, this is called the ‘hypergood’ (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 63-73, 100-102, 104-106).

Let me call higher-order goods of this kind 'hypergoods', i.e. goods which are incomparably more important than the others, but provide the standpoint from which these [other goods] must be weighed, judged, decided about." (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 63)

The hypergood has hierarchical priority or preeminence; it also has a significant control and shaping power within the moral framework. It is *the* good, the high ideal, of which the self is most conscious, most passionate about, a good that rests at the very core of one’s identity. Challenge this good and you will challenge the person at their moral deep structure. Find this good in another and you will know someone at a deep level of being. Become aware of this good in yourself and you will be in touch with your deepest passion and sense of calling; many, many university students are searching for this kind of hypergood, even if they are unaware of it. Some of us spend a lifetime in search of it.

The hypergood effectively orchestrates the arrangement and hierarchy of other goods; it interprets their priority and their moral play. It can raise or lower their priority, promote or demote them, sort them out when they come in conflict, or even eliminate (declare irrelevant) certain goods from moral play altogether. We should attend carefully to this moral driver in individuals, groups, or institutions. It is vital that the individual self be very conscious of, and be well positioned with respect to this particular good. This *preeminent good* grounds and directs one’s overall moral beliefs, goals, and aspirations; it works to define and give important shape to one’s entire moral framework. One could accurately say that it rests at the spiritual center of one’s personality; it gives meaning to one’s existence.

Examples of these hypergoods (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 65) given by Taylor are: happiness, equal respect, universal justice, divine will, self-respect and self-fulfilment. One could easily imagine family or clan or country or the health of the biosphere being such a hypergood. There can be conflict between these hypergoods, as there are between persons who hold them; one can easily see this conflict among the three major hypergoods in Western culture: (a) universal justice and reduction of human suffering (concern for the victim), (b) self-determining, self-expressive freedom, and (c) the hypergood of affirmation of everyday life or equal respect. Because of these, we end up with various priorities and political tensions, but with this language and hermeneutical help, we can come to understand what is at stake in these tensions.

This good has a major influence on how one’s individual moral horizon gets articulated, the hierarchy of life goods and how one is generally oriented in moral space (one’s stance). The hypergood is independent, and shapes the desires and choices. It is not merely an ideal or the mere object of a high admiration or contemplation (poetic entity). The hypergood can be quite demanding on the self, and often requires great personal sacrifice: e.g. civil disobedience in laying down your body in front of logging trucks, risking arrest to save old growth forests or white bear, reporting on a war at risk of one’s safety, chaining oneself to a nuclear submarine to fight for peace.
What is the role of the hypergood in moral self-constitution? What is one’s possible relationship to this good? How does it impact one’s identity? According to Taylor, a self with the requisite depth and complexity to have an identity (a thick self) must be defined in terms of such a good. One’s life is interwoven with it. The deeper the character, the stronger is the influence of the hypergood and the more integrated the identity of a person. Merely dabbling in the pool of currently available values or moral trends is not enough and can lead to alienation and confusion. The multiple-self is hard to live with, always at war with itself.

It is deeply personal since one’s whole identity is essentially defined by one’s orientation to such a hypergood. Taylor (1989, p. 63) notes that, "It is orientation to this which comes closest to defining my identity, and therefore my direction to this good is of unique importance to me." We find it at the center of our sense of calling, and thus it also acts as a personal motivation driver beyond instinct and personal survival. It provides the marker against which the individual measures her direction or trajectory in life. It tells her how she is doing and how she understands herself.

Finally the hypergood is something which one grows towards and something that moves and motivates the individual deeply—it provides emotional and spiritual core infrastructure. Taylor (1989, p. 73) says significantly, "Our acceptance of any hypergood is connected in a complex way with our being moved by it." The hypergood has a major impact on my moral stance in life and how we see the world. His strong claim is that this is not only a phenomenological account of some selves, but an exploration of the very limits of the conceivable in the reflective human life, an anthropological given.

We find this discourse quite nuanced, constructive, compelling and plausible. It resonates with our moral experience and with a Christian humanism perspective such as we articulate in Section 10. It appreciates better the stance of other differing perspectives and empathizes with how passionately they are carried in the soul. It also raises many good questions for research traction. For example, a PhD student in the humanities or political science could compare the hypergoods at issue in an international relations incident such as nuclear proliferation or land claims or ethnic conflicts or oil pipelines.

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I try to decide from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose ... It is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand ... It is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 27, 28)

Significantly and with some leverage, Taylor suggests that the hypergood that shapes the moral self could include the fulfilment of one’s duties and obligations (responsibility) to others. This is sensitive to the work of Emmanuel Lévinas.

Responsibility for the Other transports the self beyond the sphere of self-interest. Other-responsibility could also be seen as the greatest form of self-realization, featuring as the highest vocation of human subjectivity (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 112).
As a hypergood, Other-responsibility is integrated into the structure of selfhood without compromising the exteriority of the claims of the Other. This is foundational to empathy and compassion, and terribly important in an age of radical self-interest (Brad Gregory, 2012).

This discussion of the hypergood offers much to reflect upon as we seek to go beyond mere self-reflexivity and find a moral vision to guide and motivate families, communities and society, a nation or the United Nations. It offers a sensitive platform for rational moral dialogue and debate and avoids the problematic of nihilism, and will to power ethics. It is an important alternative discourse to that of Foucault’s ethics as aesthetics. One of the major weaknesses of Foucault’s ethics is that he poses it as a contest between various views, a deconstruction and reconstruction, based in a mystical/ideological use of freedom as an agonisme. But what if our agonisme is towards the common good rather than towards my entitlements?

In regards to the opening statement on rights, it seems that as a culture we have overplayed rights against the language of the good. Perhaps it is time for a renewal of Taylor’s discourse on the good to balance some of the perverse (consumeristic/narcissistic/individualistic/entitlement) emendations of rights language. We dare not lose rights language but we definitely need to renew the horizon within which it is articulated—reconnecting it to virtue and the good. For this counter-cultural task, we need genuine wisdom. This too would be worthy of a PhD project.

In order to deepen and ground this discourse of the good, we extend our hermeneutic quest to the larger horizon of the transcendent. In this trajectory, we ascend above radical skepticism and radical choice theory. We are in search of a richer text, which leads to an exploration of the connection between human goods and divine goodness. This sets up a fruitful quest, offering fresh language to moral discourse.
7. Beyond Nihilism: The Dynamic Relationship of Transcendent Divine Goodness & the Human Relationship to the Good

Following Charles Taylor’s lead to recover the language of the good as explored in the previous section, there must be a source of empowerment for living in a positive, inspiring relationship to the good. Taylor referred to this as the constitutive good. At this juncture, we bring in the theological dimension to our discussion of identity formation in late modernity. This is relevant for the practices of the good, for mediating transcendent goodness into everyday life, in order that it can empower us and breathe life into culture. Otherwise, it remains in the realm of a mere theory only. For credibility, it must also become an engaging praxis. It must become incarnational, embedded in social reality (Merleau-Ponty), full-blooded, identity-establishing.

We pursue it as part of the answer to our quest to find our place and calling in late modernity—i.e. our home. How then can transcendent goodness avoid the charge of unattainable ideal and thus discouragement (one of Nietzsche’s problems), so wholly other that it is of no human benefit? How is it possible for the divine and human good to interface? What is the human possibility for mediating a good that is transcendent of self, even transcendent of the human culture spheres of science, ethics and aesthetics? How do we make a connection with the divine horizon from within the current immanent frame, the sacred within the secular or everyday life? These are great questions.

Late in Sources of the Self, Taylor (1989) hints at the possibility in moral discourse of a transcendent turn. He suggests that there is nothing wrong or irrational with considering *agape* love (*caritas* or God-sourced love) as a hypergood within this potential philosophical turn. We hope this argument does not move too fast for you. If it does, consider it for the moment as a thought experiment. More will be said to define this category of *agape* as a potential culture driver in the next section. For the biblical writer Paul the Apostle, it is a super-virtue (I Corinthians 13) that leads to charity, community, other-orientation, humility, prudence, kindness and generosity.

With these questions in mind, it is crucial knowledge that the Holy Spirit, a member of the Christian Trinity, is a key mediation, inspiration and transformation factor in human goodness, human actualization and communication of divine goodness. The Holy Spirit offers a divine-human interface. Marquette theologian D. Stephen Long (2001) is optimistic about the human quest for the good for this reason. He believes that with the Holy Spirit, moral self-constitution can be intimately and fruitfully related to the infinite goodness of God, that God and *agape* love can become part of the moral horizon that informs and shapes the self towards its highest flourishing—in fact to take it to a new level. He is optimistic that this will rejuvenate ethics once again and give new vision and inspiration to moral life. Moral relativism and primal choice philosophy lead to cynicism and nihilism. But this is not the only alternative for enlightened minds facing a complex world. The Holy Spirit offers a reconstitution of both goodness and freedom for contemporary identity with surprising results. One’s liberation in late modernity can be into the higher moral dimensions and richer moral horizon, fueling interpretive potential with real traction. It opens up the field and increases human potential.
Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote of this in his idea of the circulation of grace. Long speaks of this grace.

The Holy Spirit infuses a goodness into us that makes us better than we know we are by ourselves. This better is what theologians mean by grace. People find themselves caught up in a journey that results in the cultivation of gifts and beatitudes they did not know were possible. They discover that this journey was possible only through friendship ... The mission of the Holy Spirit is to move us towards the charity that defines the relationship between the Father and the Son, a charity so full that it is thoroughly one and yet cannot be contained within a single origin or between an original and a copy, but always, eternally, exceeds that relationship into another. The Holy Spirit is that relationship. (D. S. Long, 2001, pp. 302-3)

This is a lot to grasp, but worth time for reflection and experimentation as to its plausibility. Divine goodness is made available as a gift by means of the Holy Spirit for the transformation of the self. The Holy Spirit offers relationship and empowerment towards being, doing and promoting the good. Amazingly, humans can in turn become entrepreneurs of divine goodness by being intentionally, proactively open to this larger moral horizon of the divine, infinite good. Here lies the possibility of discovery of intense meaning and purpose in human existence and distinct possibilities for opening doors to human flourishing. It can also fire the imagination of scholarship within moral philosophy. Take note of Glenn Tinder’s fine work (2000), The Political Meaning of Christianity: an Interpretation, where he applies agape love to a political vision of rights, dignity and responsibilities of citizens. He encourages a prophetic stance.

This is an example of the epiphanic experience of encounter of the I-Thou sort. The Holy Spirit is central to the moral life because he gifts individuals for works that they cannot or will not to achieve in their own autonomous power (even with the highest ideals of human communality, benevolence, or generosity). It occurs within the limits of their own resources, accentuating those resources and producing a calling. He equips them to be capable of forgiveness, reconciliation and loving in an agape sense, to break out of the Foucauldian self-reflexive loop. The Holy Spirit makes possible and effective the mission of goodness of Jesus Christ and his church. In the incarnation, Jesus did exemplify bodily this goodness in all he said, did and sacrificed (Jens Zimmermann 2012a, Incarnational Humanism), and now the Holy Spirit is an effective transmitter of the transcendent, infinite goodness, which is God (Psalm 107). This can have a direct and profound impact on culture and society, politics and international relations.

He represents the ongoing presence of Jesus in the church and the world, and makes possible the transformation of the self within community towards love in communion. The Spirit catches humans up into the life of God in a personal way, into the communion within the Trinity. God’s goodness comes down to us in order to draw us up into its communion. This relationship is transformational; it changes all of the dynamics about us and our stance in the world. We are no longer satisfied in our narcissism and pure self-interest, no longer threatened by the needs or imperfections of the Other.

Such a process of self-constitution opens up the horizon of human moral thinking and action, first towards God, but secondly, connecting the self through compassion with human suffering. It motivates one to take enjoyment in sharing responsibility for the
Other, rather than seeing the Other as a negative barrier to self-fulfilment. It empowers the self to move beyond radical self-interest and individualism into community and service. Within a trinitarian plausibility structure, the answer is yes to Taylor’s hypergood question, “Can we sustain our world commitment to benevolence?”

The Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity enriches and empowers the self as the unrelenting, abundant and fecund source of all human goodness. He helps the individual transcend biology and personal survival instincts. This infinite divine goodness can be tapped to make a better society and world; it offers real influence in the here and now, time-space-energy-matter-social-economic-political world. This both underwrites and holds accountable the human good and human claims to the good; it grounds and sources the good in the dynamic goodness of a trinitarian God (where mutuality is an endemic characteristic). It contains a heuristic quality: encouraging a person to learn, discover, understand, or solve certain problems. This provides both inspiration and a call to grow up into this goodness, into a new identity in Christ by means of the Holy Spirit (Eugene Peterson, 2010, *Practice Resurrection*).

Stephen Long finds that the kind of ethics (Foucault and multiple other late modern intellectuals) that emphasizes the will and absolute freedom of choice (a cheapened form of liberalism), is ill-focused and actually a form of dis-empowerment of both self and society. It has a way of shrinking the self and making it weaker and more superficial and mediocre—Taylor calls it a thin self. It is an implosion into the aesthetic. It leads to the shallow human temptation to set one’s own standard of goodness as the final or ultimate standard. Where is the growing edge in that? Is it not more an attempt to control others and the world? We thereby manipulate the language of the good out of self-interest, self-indulgence or even self-righteousness, placing ourselves in the position of superiority or elitism. This outlook has been the source of great moral decline, injustice, conflict and corruption (even terrible violence and oppression) throughout history, both within and outside the church.

Humans have thoroughly revealed that they are quite capable of using their freedom in direct contradiction to God’s goodness: e.g. to coerce other humans, promote extreme partisanship, or abuse the natural world through their own controlling interest in moral currency. It can be quite narrow and self-interested; their moral vision clearly needs to be stretched. Dr. Long promotes the vision that ethics can be focused on the constitution of the self as it relates dynamically to, and embraces, God and transcendent goodness as a moral a priori. It is fresh thinking hermeneutically. This is a parallel thought to that in Charles Taylor, who profoundly noted that the first question of ethics is the motivation question: *Who or what do you love?*

The quality of the will comes into play at exactly this point. If we open the portal of self to the infinite source of the highest goodness, our love of it may change us in a dramatic and surprising way. Long believes that moral self-constitution must be rooted in, and animated by, a love of God and a celebration of the infinitely superior goodness of God. This is the route of self-transformation and creative energy for the good in the human condition—a liberation into response and responsibility. It offers a correction to the false
self (Palmer Parker). It offers leverage to get one's life unstuck emotionally, morally, existentially, to escape the deadly quicksand of nihilism and cynicism.

Late modernity's picture of a lone will choosing between good and evil, or embracing both in an aesthetic move of conscious moral self-mutilation constitutes a tragic distraction from a move into the infinite goodness-which-is-God, being captivated and transformed by transcendent, epiphanic goodness. Stephen Long’s focus is to build one’s life-orientation, one’s identity, one’s lifestyle around this goodness. He suggests that it cannot to be reduced to an achievement of the human will alone. Goodness-making is not a faculty within the self that can be conjured, despite the claims of constructivists. It requires some inspiration outside the self, calling us into a higher level of being. Long writes that,

Human freedom is not about the capacity to choose between good and evil. Human freedom occurs when our desires are so turned toward God and the good that no choice is necessary ... Jesus shows us that such a life is possible in our humanity—not against it. (D. S. Long, 2001, p. 46)

Moral transformation in this situation comes through a commitment to the good, but not through seeking a controlling knowledge of good and evil, nor through creative strategies for self-control alone. Human creatures as self-legislating beings do not possess reliable moral resources within to enact true goodness. This is where Post-Romanticism is quite naïve, as are various attempts at a ‘scientific ethics’. Acts of the will do not automatically constitute acts of goodness. Many acts of the will are malevolent, self-indulgent, dark and death-dealing. We need qualitative criteria. Goodness is not invented by humans, but discovered by attending to the situation at hand (mindfulness) and calling on divine resources for the sake of flourishing within human community. This can promote peace and curb violence in our world. We clearly need more discourse, more town hall meetings of the sort that includes what is good for all concerned on a public debate issue.

Long, somewhat further along the same moral trajectory as Charles Taylor's transcendent philosophical turn towards agape love, concludes that the primary question for the moral self is "What or who is the good that I seek and that seeks me?" (2001, p. 130). This is the concept of quest or intentional journey, part of the narrative development of self. Christoph Schwöbel sums up this thought:

The reconstitution of created freedom through the appropriation of the revelation of God’s goodness in Christ which is made possible in the Spirit is characterized by the acknowledgement of the limitations of human freedom that become evident where this freedom is no longer understood as self-produced, but as a gift of grace. The liberation from the abortive attempt of self-constitution of human freedom discloses the reality of the other person and the non-human creation as the one to whom good action is directed. Human goodness is realized where it is acknowledged that it is not self-produced, but the gift of God's creative, revealing and inspiring action. (C. Schwöbel (1992) p. 75)

Through the Holy Spirit, goodness becomes a communicable and accessible human reality as gift. It becomes grounded, embodied, situated in real life. The individual is not left alone to fend for herself, left to her own devices and resources to make her way in the world, or on her own to continually defend/legitimate her behaviour. This highly
individualistic way is very stressful and full of potholes, disorientation and distressing dead ends.

This connection of human goodness to the transcendent brings a bright hopefulness of retrieving, reviving and continuing the language of the good for Western culture. It grounds it in divine goodness. It also carries a certain humility regarding any human claim to (or construction of) the good. We must hold all human creations of the good lightly and critically. The conversation and debate about the good in moral self-constitution is thereby enlivened and opened up, given fresh energy and potency. The metaphor gains new traction, pulling us forward in the exploration. It can impact our research in fresh ways, adding new light and new ways of approaching old problems, rising above what we once thought were our options. It marries the human to the divine imagination in order to write new chapters for humans living together and negotiating justice, fairness and livelihood—win/win senarios. It involves pursuing self-understanding in the presence of God and the Other (neighbor) instead of paying obsessive attention to one’s self.

This approach offers a qualitative paradigm shift from Foucault’s position of assuming that the individual human is the origin/constructor and controlling agent of moral currency, and creator of the moral life through his ethics as aesthetics (constant self-invention and re-invention). The moral self, in Foucault's picture, seeks for autonomous resources, apart from God, in the pursuit of a radical freedom of self-expression and self-construction. This is why personal re-invention must never end in his view. It seems much less appealing in light of our discussion so far, even more stifling and myopic, given the broader and richer horizons of the good and transcendent goodness. Foucault offers a weak form of transcendence. There is so much more to the landscape of the human story than Foucault was able to realize as a restricted poststructuralist (within the confines of the immanent frame). He is seeking for transcendence I the self, but cannot achieve it.

In the ongoing debate between Foucault and Taylor, between Nihilism and meaning generation, it does come to a watershed between the sovereignty of self and the sovereignty of a loving God. Who or what is the source and standard of ultimate goodness beyond the immanent human frame? What will inform us regarding moral philosophy within that frame? We will see in the next section that there exists a watershed contest/debate between the telos of self with its interests, desires and needs and the telos of divine agape love. It makes a dramatic difference whether God and agape love are allowed to appear on the map of our moral horizon (to cross the blood-brain barrier so to speak). Motives matter; quality of choice matters. The discourse we are exploring can be a revolutionary awakening, offering a hypergood that anchors the soul and promotes a profound new quality of freedom. If ideological naturalism were true, would we even be discussing the concept of being good with or without God?, asks philosopher David Bentley Hart (2013). Would we indeed be doing moral reflection or care about our identity or our calling and purpose? Materialistic naturalism lacks the explanatory range we are needing for a more robust kind of flourishing (Thomas Nagel, 2012).
We now open the wager on the content of *agape* love to power and sensitize, shape and educate the human will. This offers an important philosophical turn that releases the self from the twin horns of the dilemma of either self-hatred or moral lobotomy (Nietzsche and Foucault). Instead of embracing both good and evil without discernment, or groaning under the burden of guilt and shame of law without grace, one can be free to embrace an empowering and liberating divine forgiveness and goodness—to overcome the relational acids of evil with divine goodness (Romans 12). We strongly commend this as a vision worthy of examination as the way forward for the human globalized community: whether the issue is race, gender, land claims, or post-colonial identity.
8. Beyond Nihilism: The Transcendent Turn to Agape Love

In this section, we want to open up Taylor’s concept of a transcendent philosophical turn to agape love. It furthers the discussion begun in Section 2, Wager on Love. We know that language has the power to leverage something really significant. Is it possible that the ancient Greek word agape possibly is such a leverage concept? It has a long and noble history in the West (Anders Nygren, 1982, *Agape and Eros*). Paul the Jewish-Christian Apostle leveraged the concept in powerful ways in his letters to young churches. Perhaps too few of us are familiar with its legacy and how it has transformed the West from a much more brutal Greco-Roman ethos (David Bentley Hart, 2009) to a more civil society, with a heritage of civility and compassion that both atheist and Christian enjoy today in the West.

It is worth delving into the concept in more detail in this section, to see how it might assist late moderns in their identity struggle, in a journey from nihilism to sustainable meaning and hope. If we are more than animals, what impact is there in agape love? A recent CBC exclusive news documentary on North Korean prison camps suggests that there are places in the world where humans are treated worse than animals, where Dionysian depths are reached by prison guards and the government is one of the most oppressive in the world, where lies and propaganda rule. Human rights are almost non-existent under this kind of governance, which operates with a total absence of grace. This is clearly an unacceptable situation.

Alternately, transcendent agape love has a transformative impact on the self, according to Charles Taylor. He believes that it can help release late moderns from the twin dilemmas of self-hatred and moral lobotomy (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 495-521). It articulates as a love from above, transcendent of the human community, beyond mere human flourishing or an ethic of tribal or partisan survival. It offers the fullness that we all desire in life. He talks about this in terms of the possibility of a transcendent turn in philosophy to release late moderns from the burden of too much choice that leaves them morally frozen, or confused, with too much immature freedom. It is freedom that is shrill and poorly defined, devoid of responsibility for others or the common good. Freedom is a burden for many who do not have a serious life trajectory or substantial set of values.

But we detect a cognitive barrier to agape. Today’s cynic has trouble reading and discerning this language: it is reduced to pathetic sentimentality. For them, there is metaphoric closure or spin. Many late moderns have a problem believing in such a love, such spiritual fuel. Those proud and cynical skeptics want to treat evidence of agape love and evidence for God like a laboratory investigation. They cannot see the sign in the Advent, cannot discern the import of the storyline of the woman at the well. They cannot understand why scholars would travel the globe to investigate such signs, or why thousands would gather to partake of this bread and wine, this transcendent pedagogy. There is no feeling of wonder at the Advent miracle, no wonder at the carpenter’s compassion for the marginalized. Handicapped by moral blockage, or blinded by science (scientism), our cynic cannot acknowledge or receive divine love prima facie.
Instead, the cynic settles for absence (nihilism) and misses divine presence. We might reflect, “Are many of us looking for God in all the wrong places, using the wrong filters and then carelessly claiming that he is irrelevant to our human aspirations?” Do we have the wrong research methodology, or dysfunctional interpretive tools? Is there a mental block? Has dogmatic rationalism closed our minds to something significant, shut out the transcendent that still haunts us (James K.A. Smith, 2014)?

Where might lie the cognitive hope in these circumstances? As a counterpoint to the skeptic’s dismay and mental block, Loyola philosopher Paul K. Moser reframes the investigation: “Are we humans in a position on our own to answer the question of whether God exists, without our being morally challenged by God?” (P.K. Moser, 2009, pp. 49-64). Revelation of this sort involves encounter: divine cognitive grace engaging stony, resistant hearts and skeptical minds. What kind of person will actually discover God, feel divine presence, experience and be transformed by the holy communion of agape? Courage, humility and perseverance may help keep the trail warm and the investigation interesting. There is no magic cognitive bullet to answer all our questions, but there may be an alternative posture which can lead to different results of knowing.

In fact, evidence for the God of agape love is no scientific sport where we treat him as a laboratory commodity. Rather, it requires the seeker to undergo personal examination. Pride blocks the road to insight in this case. Dr. Moser informs us that we need the right motivation of the heart to deal properly with the hidden God. We need healing from our cynicism in order to see and perceive, discern and decipher, to appreciate and apprehend. These investigations are not just about the first cause or the evidence of a designer in a fine-tuned universe, as interesting and evocative as that is. Love itself sets the parameters for discovery and the rules of engagement. Scientism is proved inadequate; the hermeneutic is all wrong. The story that science tells is not fully adequate to our needs.

When does data, when do key questions become revelation or epiphany? What if the fundamentals are not cosmos, nebulae and galaxies, matter and energy, time, space, forces and motion, protons and electrons, but rather love, joy, peace and goodness, I-Thou relationship, purity of inner self. What if taking responsibility for our neighbour is one of the most fundamental principles of life, even more fundamental that the law of gravity? D. Stephen Long captures this:

Only on the basis of an ontology of love can gift be understood. Because love, and not pure reason, is the basic structure of being, the failure of human reason to achieve infinite desires is not negative but positive. Thus we do not need to negate reason in order to believe, but rather to supplement and intensify it. We receive knowledge as a gift. … Gift, another name for the Holy Spirit, is the fullness of being, the perfection that surrounds us with an inevitable desire for truth, goodness and beauty. It illumines our lives. (D. S. Long, 2009, p. 159)

For Wittgenstein, truth is not a matter of detachment, but engagement, the kind of engagement that love entails and that requires judgments based on qualitative contrasts.... Wittgenstein's appeal to love depends on something more akin to 'virtue epistemology'. Love is not opposed to truth; they are both necessary virtues for knowledge. You cannot know what you do not love; you cannot love what you do not know. (Ibid. pp. 300-1)
Here we find a key insight on the faith-reason discussion. What if love is the core of reality not raw power? James Houston notes that this is how American reformer Jonathan Edwards perceived (quoted by J.M. Houston, 2006, p. 145):

Edward’s universe is essentially a universe of personal relationships. Reality is a communication of affections, ultimately of God’s love and creatures’ responses. Material things are transitory and ephemeral. Their meanings are found in their relation to the loves at the center of reality. Although they are transitory, they can have great eternal significance if they are recognized for what they are, signs or expressions of God’s love.

*Agape* love is a boon for atheists, agnostics and nihilists as well as believers. God will show up for those who stop their cynical rant and attend more carefully to his positive gestures and initiatives. Then the investigation will go through a radical recalibration; the data that was thrown out will be re-examined. The paradigm will shift. The way we attend to the details makes all the difference. His *agape* love directed at the human conscience is an invitational call to an existential depth within us; late moderns will be capable of experiencing disclosure in the midst of transformation. *Agape* offers an enlightening grace that shines divine light on inner depths and motivations. Moser poses the critical question: “Are we sincerely attending to the divine call via conscience and experienced *agape* in a way that leads us before the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus?” This involves a refraction of light received through a different prism to produce new insight (Bernard Lonergan). A new picture emerges.

Within the zone of *agape* there is self-respect, forgiveness, dignity for outsiders, protection for victims, reconciliation with one’s deepest identity, compassion for the poor and moral growth. This is the *constitutive good* which can empower the moral self, a self that emerges most robustly within a community of mutuality. Trinitarian love offers the self a certain stance towards society; it sees something good in the human self, that is, the created (*imago dei*) image of God (C. Taylor, 1999, p. 33; J. Richard Middleton, 2005).

There exist a lost humanist heritage that is highly worthy of recovery, a Christian humanism to confront today’s anti-humanisms and nihilisms. More will be said about this conversation in section 10. Professor Jens Zimmermann of Trinity Western University (also a fan of Charles Taylor and hermeneutical investigations) urges that we will not solve many of our cultural problems without such a recovery rooted in *agape* love.

Understanding the nature of reason is central to our conception of human existence. We have to resist a narrow conception of human rationality that excludes religion as irrational because such a view cripples our ability to analyze correctly the current state of Western culture. As Rodney Stark has argued in his book *The Victory of Reason*, Christianity’s ability to combine faith and reason with a progressive view of human nature laid the foundation for Western science and technological progress…. Building on Judaism, Christianity also allowed for the concepts of human dignity, personhood and individuality that have decisively shaped Western views of society…. Neither the best nor the worst features of modernity are comprehensible without the transformative influence of Christianity on Greco-Roman culture. Without religion, the West would not be what it is, and without understanding the religious roots of Western culture and their continuing influence on Western thought, we lack the self-understanding necessary to address our current cultural crisis (J. Zimmermann, 2012a, p. 25 & 26).
Charles Taylor also captures this insight in one of his books.

Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity. Now it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves up to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set by Nietzsche and Foucault. (C. Taylor, 1999, p. 35)

It is ironic for Taylor to suggest that Foucault, the philosopher of freedom of expression sets limits that stifle certain important alternatives for self-constitution, and deprives us of very significant sources of the self that can empower us morally. Scientism also creates this problem. This is like being in denial about precious mineral resources right under our feet, while we live in poverty. Agape is that precious personal and cultural resource that late moderns need. Taylor pushes ahead to build the concept:

The original Christian notion of agape love is of a love that God has for humans, which is connected with their goodness as creatures (though we don't have to decide whether they are loved because good or good because loved). Human beings participate through grace in this love. There is a divine affirmation of the creature, which is captured in the repeated phrase in Genesis 1 about each stage of the creation, “and God saw that it was good”. Agape is inseparable from such “seeing-good”. (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 516)

This ‘seeing-good’ of others who are both similar and different than us, discredits and deconstructs prejudice, exclusion, hatred, racism or sexism. The individual self is elevated and enhanced by this love, affirmed in identity and destiny. Allowing oneself to be loved by God is a profound existential experience; it can reach the deepest depths of the human heart (inner self). This can help the cynic to trust again.

Agape love informs and offers definition to the quality of one’s will, one’s choices; trinitarian goodness empowers, clarifies, and animates the human soul, fills it with creative possibilities. It acknowledges the value that each person gains from the recognition, mercy and affirmation of God (his generous embrace). Within this framework, the self does not struggle to define itself alone, but engages and is engaged by this transforming love of the divine Other. It is a large boon to philosophical anthropology; the world of the self is opened up to this new horizon of challenge and opportunity. Humanity is called to spiral upward to mountain top heights.

It is time to explore a more progressive stance in late modernity as Zimmermann articulates below. It is materialism that we must call into question.

Living in a postsecular world means that secularism is no longer the standard for reasonable thought. If indeed it is true that Western culture continues to experience a crisis of identity and purpose, the dogmatic exclusion of sources of transcendent purpose (i.e. religion) seems unwise…. Such dogmatism is not secular thinking, if secular is taken at its root meaning of “this worldly”. Rather, the arbitrary exclusion of religion from reasonable discourse is secularist ideology, a fundamentalist rejection of all interpretation of the world, except the materialist one that excludes religion. (J. Zimmermann, 2012a, p. 41)
Christians claim that this progressive anthropology towards a *thicker* self, which involves *agape*, can be seen most clearly in the God-man Jesus Christ. The Word made *flesh* underwrites all human words, all language, articulate speech as Cambridge poet Malcolm Guite notes. The love talked about in Romans 12 or I John is underwritten by the life, compassion, self-sacrifice and community started by Jesus. This is the exit that Kierkegaard talks about—exit from the burden and self-reflexive loop of despair (carrying the entire burden of meaning on our own shoulders, and being lost in our own self-interest). We cannot bear it and must find a way out. We need meta-physical meaning to identify us and draw us into its grasp and calling.

Divine trinitarian love creates the larger horizon for human loving, a love that issues from the power to love in spite of rejection, a sacrificial love, a love that is an end in itself. This goodness is a relational attribute in God; it exists and exhibits itself in the form of a *communion of love*: the relational, interpersonal, mutually supportive, loving relationship among the persons of the Trinity. Theologian Christoph Schwöbel (1992, p. 73) explains how human goodness is rooted in this divine transcendent love: “In a conception where goodness is understood as a divine attribute, rooted in God’s trinitarian agency, goodness has to be understood as an essentially relational attribute.” From this perspective, humans do not invent the good or invent love out of their individual passion, but discover it derivatively from God and in the context of community. They recover its enchantment, its mystery. It is a *gift* from God, a profound opening in the fabric of human society (immanent frame)—a socio-cultural breakthrough, a dynamic in which they can participate. To say it poetically, light shines through the sign *agape* to light the whole world, to reveal new colour and texture to life.

The author finds it helpful to remember his early days as an undergraduate at Queen’s University where he was in a desperate search for this sort of community amidst a sea of faces and conflicting opinions and worldviews on campus. At first, he only found it in bits and pieces here and there; it was frustratingly elusive. Unfortunately, it is that way for many people; loyalties can be short-lived in a utilitarian world where we are all climbing the ladder of success. Eventually by third year, he discovered it in its fullness in a Christian community near campus where love was incarnated, where it was palpable, abundant and consistent. He found his community of interlocutors and soul mates to grow morally and personally, push out the boundaries spiritually. In this environment of lived *agape* and careful biblical and prophetic teaching, he flourished in his faith like never before. This epiphany gave new hope and vision for the world and opened up life goals to new horizons, new dreams of a better world.

Fourth year Life Science class of 23 persons became somewhat of a community as well; we looked at each other with the respect of survivors after a four-year storm of learning and wrestling with identity and purpose. In a different sense, we became more of an academic community, open with each other about who we were as human beings and about our fears and aspirations, where we wanted to go with our lives, what we wanted them to mean. We were no longer just competitors, but realized a stronger sense of collegiality. Several individuals in that bright class were open to discussing this *agape* love, even though it seemed strange to them at the time.
It is the same gift, the same breakthrough, that is needed in today’s developing nations as Canadian Senator Romeo Dallaire noted recently at a talk to the Vancouver Prayer Breakfast May 2014. He witnessed firsthand in Rwanda what the loss of love and humanism can do to devastate a people (genocide), how human beings can fall so far below their potential, as to incarnate evil itself. This has inspired him to set up an agency to rescue child soldiers; it was children who were used to murder 800,000 innocents systematically in Rwanda. Wicked tribal ideology wreaked havoc on the country; agape disappeared and a spiritual darkness fell on that land. The healing of this nation can only come through a recovery of goodness and agape love: forgiveness, reconciliation, and new hope of loving one’s neighbor again. It will take time and much grace. It is similar to the situation in South Africa where Desmond Tutu led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Philosopher David Bentley Hart (2009) noted that historically Christians have been known for their concern for the poor, the weak, the uneducated, the marginalized and the unwell. He wishes to correct some popular conceptions, but misinformed history, of how Christianity has impacted Western culture. Over the centuries, Christians have made significant contributions to the culture of the contemporary hospital, including the famous Knights of St. John in the twelfth century. We suggest that this benevolent humanism emerged because citizens were inspired and empowered by agape love. Much good came of it. Over time, it transformed culture in the ancient world. Never perfect, Christians discovered this transcendent turn in their identity and it empowered them to be change agents within society, to be counter-cultural. Hart recalls the following examples:

There was ... a long tradition of Christian monastic hospitals for the destitute and the dying, going back to the time of Constantine and stretching from the Syrian and Byzantine East to the Western fringes of Christendom, a tradition that had no real precedent in pagan society. St. Ephraim the Syrian (A.D. 306-373), when the city of Edessa was ravaged by plague, established hospitals open to those who were afflicted. St. Basil the Great (A.D. 329-379) founded a hospital in Cappadocia with a ward set aside for the care of lepers, whom he did not disdain to nurse with his own hands. St Benedict of Nursia (A.D. 480-547) opened a free infirmary at Monte Cassino and made care of the sick a paramount duty of the monks .... During the Middle Ages, the Benedictines alone were responsible for more than two thousand hospitals in Western Europe. (D.B. Hart, 2009, p. 30)

Indeed, there seems to be much leverage in this word agape to change attitudes, organize people to action, move planeloads of food and aid, protect children, provide education, offer a home for refugees, stimulate the economy, heal broken relationships and fight injustice and political oppression. It has made a dramatic difference in attitudes and in society, to leverage the world in ways that we all can admire. Could agape love be one of the hidden or buried hypergoods in our Western heritage that we are searching for in late modernity, and give us solid hope for change? Could it be something to anchor our lives, sort out the crisis of identity and show us the way home spiritually, the miracle we have been secretly longing for?

We believe it is. Allow us to wrap up this point with a profound insight which Charles Taylor discovered from Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It shows that agape offers a direction for life enhancement as it connects us to the transcendent within the immanent frame. It is a truly profound and courageous statement.
What will transform us is an ability to love the world and ourselves, to see it as good in spite of the wrong. But this will only come to us if we can accept being part of it, and that means accepting responsibility. Loving the world and ourselves is in a sense a miracle, in face of all the evil and degradation that it and we contain. But the miracle comes on us if we accept being part of it. Involved in this is our acceptance of love from others. We become capable of love through being loved; and over against the perverse apostolic succession of terror and violence is a grace-dispensing one. Dostoyevsky brings together here a central idea of the Christian tradition, especially evident in the Gospel of John, that people are transformed through being loved by God, a love that they mediate to one another, on the one hand, with the modern notion of a subject who can help to bring on transfiguration through the stance he takes to himself and the world, on the other... What he [Dostoyevsky] was opposing was that humans affirm their dignity in separation from the world. (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 452)

We want to apply or extend this concept within the university setting, to show that agape love can trump nihilism within academia. What kind of people form a virtuous community? Is it possible for a university to become such a community? We are certainly familiar with the vices of people in our department, the willingness to exploit our vulnerabilities, or steal our resources, head hunt our best scholars. John Sommerville is only one of several scholars who are talking about the crisis of the modern university. He sees it as a crisis of values.

How do we locate ourselves with respect to the good? What do wisdom, courage and hope, benevolence and love have to do with scholarship? What do moderation, self-restraint and frugality, patience and gratitude have to do with academic excellence, business acumen or scientific brilliance? What about trust, honesty and humility? Can we truly flourish if we live, work and love virtuously? Can virtue inform our academic vision which in turn shapes our goals and actions and our relationship with colleagues? Are virtuous people suckers for those who would exploit them or are they the real leaders of tomorrow? Many of us know of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s landmark book After Virtue which attempts to recover the cultural loss of this ancient language of virtue. In its place, late moderns have often substituted Weber’s (Nietzschean) language of values. MacIntyre questions and challenges this move. Virtue ethics has recently made a strong comeback in philosophy.

We believe it is terribly relevant to today’s academic atmosphere and story of higher education. It can address some of the nagging problems in academia. Virtue is a strong characteristic of a person or institution (David Lyle Jeffrey in an address at UBC). A moral virtue is an excellence of character, developed by conscious choices over time and thus for which we can and should be praised. Virtue disposes one to act in a reasonable way to avoid extremes, to act in short as a sage (prudent one) would act. Virtues are heuristic: they teach us about new dimensions, nuances, texture to life as we embrace them and embody them.

It is a great gift to be trained and mentored in the virtues. Environmental theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger (For the Beauty of the Earth) from Hope College in Michigan shared his concern for environmental stewardship virtues with the UBC community. He articulates the language this way:
A virtue is a state of praiseworthy character—with the attendant desires, attitudes and emotions. Formed by choices over time, a virtue disposes us to act in certain excellent ways. Knowing which way is the truly excellent way involves avoiding the extremes of vice by looking to people of virtue as role models. As certain virtues shape our character they influence how we see the world. And the entire process of forming virtues is shaped by a particular narrative and community. The settled disposition to act well, which makes us who we are, is nurtured by the stories we imbibe and the communities of which we are a part. (S. Bouma-Prediger, 2010, p.140)

There is an art or finesse, a personal strength and creativity to virtue. Virtues orient us toward both individual and group flourishing and also the flourishing of the biosphere. It takes the whole picture into account regarding responsible action and attitude; it involves integral rather than narrow or one track thinking. It assumes trustworthy social relationships characteristic of a moral community; it takes into consideration an individual as well as a common good. There are academic and research virtues (Linda Zagzebski’s Virtues of the Mind) which help the university keep its integrity as a holistic knowledge center. Oxford's Iris Murdoch (1997), although an agnostic, had a high view of the transcendent moral good, influencing Charles Taylor and many other emerging philosophers in her day. She knew the cash out value of virtue; she refused cynicism and did not accept the end of ideals; she believed in the possibility of a good man or woman. It was not adequate that these ideas be simply replaced by human desires or appetites.

Early Modern European Historian Brad Gregory (2012) from Notre Dame in his brilliant tome The Unintended Reformation in a chapter called "Subjectivizing Morality" traces important changes in morality in the West. He makes note of a time when the virtuous community was a common social and political consciousness in Europe, part of people's normal identity. Today he claims that this has been exchanged for a utilitarian, self-centered language of rights. Gregory notes:

A transformation from a substantive morality of the good to a formal morality of rights constitutes the central change in Western ethics over the past half millennium, in terms of theory, practice, laws and institutions. Moreover, there is a historical relationship between the creation of ethics of rights and the antecedent ethics of the good that it displaced, a shift that involves much more than the institutionalized triumph of putatively superior ethical and political ideas…. Once the metaphysical basis of an ethics of the good has been jettisoned, nothing remains in principle but the human will and its desires protected by the state…. An ethics of rights displaced and marginalized a substantive Christian ethics of the good even as it continued to draw on it, and thus fostered the subjectivization of morality. (B. Gregory, 2012, p. 184 and 189)

This quote offers a profound insight into ‘how the West was lost’ from a moral perspective. At one time, rights were articulated within values of the communal good, within the discourse of the virtuous community. Now they have morphed into a consumeristic commodity to fulfill my subjective desires, opinions, or consumer choices (deified preferences and a unchecked wish list of conflicting subjective wants). Today, our individual good seems to be in tension with the common good (within a discourse of individualism, self-interest and personal entitlements). As a result, we are struggling to find the social glue or the common purpose to hold society together; we have lost that the center, the vision for a virtuous community. But perhaps it can be regained with some effort, at least partially.
How do we recover once again and leverage the power of virtues and the power of *agape*, the supreme virtue of *caritas* for the university and society? This is just a preliminary exploration. The apostle Paul believed that *agape* was the hub from which all other virtues radiated and the imitation of Christ provide the standard for living a certain kind of life within accountable relationships, within community. This is truly a grand quest before us late moderns and perhaps a risky but positive platform for a politician. We believe that it is not only possible but necessary for our future well-being within a civil society and a productive university. We believe there is still a distant memory to tap into and that seniors can still pass on these virtues to the young, but it will need to be intentional (James Houston, *The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood*) as some of our senior icons indicate. Perhaps we can enter this into the dialogue with today’s cultural ethos. Some faculty members have been meeting in small groups on campuses across America to discuss their heartfelt values and to encourage one another in the virtues: see *Transforming Conversations: a guide to mentoring communities among colleagues in higher education* written by Peter Felten, H. Dirksen L. Bauman, Aaron Kheriaty and Edward Taylor (2013).
Language and text is a key focus of attention in late modernity. Students in the arts, humanities and social sciences think much in terms of language, sign, signifier, and signified. We envy the great poets who possess acute skill in word craft, the storyteller who can enthrall. Many university writers long to capture that brilliant articulate grasp of things, to enhance the capacity of their grammar, rhetoric, and storytelling skill. Language is power in university, commerce and society at large. Immigrants quickly realize that they are quite vulnerable without competence in the language of their new country; in Quebec or Belgium many have to master two new languages. We are homo linguisticus; language is essential to our very human and cultural survival.

Academics collect millions of words, analyze them, compare them, translate and decipher them. Libraries brim with millions of books, journals and periodicals, electronic articles. The final dissertation in one’s PhD needs to be very carefully written; editing the final draft can take many hours and weeks, even months. We make a ‘close reading of the text’ in order to have credibility in our analytical work. There is language or semiotics also in DNA within a cell—3.5 billion base pairs code for life. But academics also deconstruct or dethrone the language of those whose perspective they oppose, or a previous regnant philosophical regime they hope to depose. Or we can actually trivialize language by reducing it to mere games that get played at English seminars or colloquiums—this can become a form of clever nihilism. Words, signs and symbols are major currency of universities in all fields. If one transfers fields, a whole new vocabulary has to be mastered. Philosophers and lawyers are very fond of language, logic and grammar; wording is critical in a merger contract or a peace agreement.

Much ink has been spilt in recent years on the role of discourse as a source of the self. Identity is deeply embedded in language; we all have a vital relationship with our mother tongue where we first found meaning in the world. We cannot escape language from our earliest days on planet earth; it is our existential lifeblood. We breathe air and we speak words to engage and make sense of world. We are involved in the wonderful art of articulation (making the tacit more explicit), finding the words that resonate with reality as we know it at the time. This is an urgent task. It is the process whereby the aspects of the world are identified, clarified and made accessible, so that they can empower us. This is where the hermeneutic way of seeing described earlier is vital. The individual self emerges amidst an ongoing culture-shaping conversation in some specific life-world. We interpret text; sometime the text interprets us; we self-interpret constantly (A. Thiselton, 1995).

Crystal Downing (2006) shows the importance of language in interpreting the postmodern self. There is a dialectic two-way phenomenon between self and language. Self is neither totally transcendent of language (modernist tendency) nor a mere product or effect of language (postmodern tendency). Things are much richer and more complex and imaginative. As sociologist Peter Berger points out, there is a sense in which humans make the world (culture) and the world (culture) in turn shapes them and their descendants (Berger and Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality). We both inherit and contribute to our language world.
If we are wise, we try to pick up the theme and the tone of such conversation, to get as quickly as possible into what philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called the all-important language game. The alternative is a painful and frightening alienation and marginalization; we cannot engage the political without good language or we will be shouting into the wind. Linguistic autism is no fun; it is a terror, as we discover when we move from one discipline to another: e.g. mathematics to sociology, biology to theology. Perhaps it is more common than we think to become speechless, especially when we step outside the confines of our discipline. To misunderstand language, to be unable to communicate, is to be alone, unable to engage the world, quite vulnerable to exploitation. We map or come to understand our reality through language and it continually changes and develops with changing contexts.

Sometimes, however, there may be too much emphasis on language as an end in itself, as the ultimate thing, the final reality. How can we avoid the gnosticism of settling only for the intra-linguistic, which leaves language disconnected to anything outside it—separation of signifier from signified, separation of word from world? One writer just stopped writing entirely for a year; the blank page was a sign of this disconnect between word and world. The blank page was the great writer’s statement on reality; for him, it was nothingness (absence). Why write at all if it is mere words about words, sentences within sentences, going nowhere? Does language point not beyond itself? Otherwise how can it avoid self-implosion and cynicism: dissolution? Wheaton College English Professor Roger Lundin (1993, Culture of Interpretation) effectively describes this condition where language is reified and the self is repressed and demoted to its victim. There are times and circumstances when language can become a cage. We also get some truly brilliant insight on the self and language from philosopher Calvin Schrag in the Self After Postmodernity (1997).

Does language itself construct reality? Does it just play with us? We wonder at times. Things can get a bit complex and confusing. This is where we think we have lost the center of it all, the connection with a core ‘reality’. Distinguished sociologist James Davison Hunter (2010) writes prophetically about the daunting problem of dissolution in late modernity:

The modern world, by its very nature, questions if not negates the trust that connects human discourse and the “reality” of the world. In its mildest expressions, it questions the adequacy of language to make the world intelligible. In its more aggressive expressions, however, it fosters a doubt that what is said has anything to do with what exists “out there”…. The problem is this: when the objectified and shared meaning of words are undermined, when we no longer have confidence that words signify what we thought they signified, then it is possible to impute any meaning to words one desires. And if words can mean anything, then they have no intrinsic meaning or at least no possibility of a common meaning. They only mean what we say they mean…. None make any sense outside their own specific discourse…. In a culture in which the covenant between signified and signifier, word and world is broken, words are emptied of meaning. The forces of dissolution, then, lead us to a place of absence, a place where we can never be confident of what is real, what is true, what is good…. The only thing left to connect words to the world are will and power—that is a will to power rooted in desires and judgments that have no justification but are their own measure of moral worth and significance. (J.D. Hunter, 2010, pp. 205-6)
This is indeed a challenging situation. How does language actually work constructively, productively and faithfully? Is it possible to recover logos (presence), a grounding to language? What is the healthy and ‘proper’ relationship between self and language? This is critical for a student’s identity formation because our language (especially our mother tongue and that of our discipline) is deeply involved in shaping us morally, spiritually and intellectually. We often do not realize this process is happening until we leave the cocoon of our undergrad environment, our first intense language context. Language is heavily implicated in culture-making and world-making, and self-constitution. The gift of language allows us to actually shape and make culture, as well as critique cultural corruption (Andy Crouch, 2008). It is definitely not an easy question to answer, but we want to claim that the dynamics of self and language are much richer and more complex than sometimes claimed or understood. Hermeneutics philosopher Anthony Thiselton (1995) agrees. Language and interpretation are both vitally important.

Charles Taylor offers some expertise in philosophy of language (1989, p. 35-41). He writes that: “To study persons is to study beings who only exist in, or are partly constituted by a certain language”. He is also sensitive to two different uses of language, two linguistic cultures:

a. Expressivist-Constitutive uses of language (Herder, Hamann, Humboldt, Gadamer) In this culture, we recognize that metaphysics cannot be done by abstracting from language, but by turning to it. It recognizes the mystery that surrounds language. Truth does not look for the conditions by which language refers to reality; instead truth is manifest through music, art, facial expressions, liturgy, the aesthetic. Sentences are much too limiting to be the primary vehicles bearing the weight of truth. This tradition draws on a more Augustinian understanding of language. Everything is a sign. Charles Taylor places the later Wittgenstein in the expressivist-constitutive tradition, avoiding an instrumentalization of language as the basis for truth. He actually changes traditions mid-career. This is part of the hermeneutical approach to seeing the world. We tend to see this use of language in European Continental philosophy. Jens Zimmermann has a good grasp of this tradition (The Passionate Intellect 2006; Incarnational Humanism 2012a). We find it operative in cultural studies.

b. Designative uses of language (Hobbes to Locke to Condillac) In this culture, we trap the pursuit of wisdom within language and confine it to immanence, where language and its relationship to truth are reduced to pointing. It is a more flattened view. Language primarily designates objects in the world. The object is observed but not participated in. One assumes a use of language based on quantitative judgments that are non-subject dependent. This tradition contributes to a mechanistic universe leaving it disenchanted. It is committed to the primacy of epistemology (evidence and justified belief). It is not oriented to universals or essences, but is more empirical in its approach. We tend to find this use in the hard sciences and where ideological scientism applied to other disciplines. We see this use more in Anglo-American or Analytical philosophy.
Taylor goes on to highlight the communitarian aspects of language within the expressive-constitutive-hermeneutical usage.

The question ‘who?’ places someone as an interlocutor in a society of interlocutors (conversation partners). ... A language only exists and is maintained within a linguistic community. Therefore a self is only a self among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it ... I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out.... Because language is never private, it serves to place some matter out in the open between interlocutors...to put things in public space. The constitutive dimension of language provides the medium through which some of our most important concerns, the characteristically human concerns, can impinge on us all. This makes possible judgments and standards. (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 28, 35 & 239).

Within academia, we are much better positioned if we are in the right community of good, wise and witty interlocutors, the cutting edge school of thought and dialogue in our field. “Where is that degree, those ideas, from?” a colleague may ask. Of course, we cannot all be in or from top ranked schools, but we are willing to cross oceans and continents to find this conversation with the right people, especially for a PhD or Postdoc. It offers us a better language game. It is urgent that we seek out good and wise conversation wherever we can find it, in order to get the most out of our educational experience. We should become aware of the linguistic movers and shakers, even if we disagree with them, because they become the markers against which we identify our position on a subject. Who is shaping the language and ethos of your discipline? We should frequent the doorstep of the wise, the prescient, the prophetic, the people of deep insight and character, the leader in the field. In graduate school, we want to be more in charge of how we are shaped; we search for excellence in mentorship. The right conversation is worth its weight in gold. Choose your interlocutors wisely!

The language community is both intensive and extensive. Our conversation with the ancients, the Greeks, Romans, the biblical authors, other great minds, moral exemplars, early church fathers or other historical figures is a great privilege and even a great necessity for our identity. We late moderns did not arrive from another planet fully formed; we have a cultural and linguistic history. The conversation we are often having began centuries ago. If we become too narrow in our interests, we could be starving ourselves of good interlocutors. Notre Dame Early Modern European Historian Brad Gregory notes: "We cannot understand the character of contemporary realities until and unless we see how they have been shaped and are still being shaped by the distant past." He covers major changes that have occurred over five hundred years in the West in his 2012 tome The Unintended Reformation. Brad is an extremely good conversation partner for this reason. Denis Alexander of the Faraday Institute of Dialogue on Science and Religion is also a prime interlocutor on the history and philosophy of science and the play of faith in science. These people who offer us a linguistic and cultural heritage, improve and enrich our language base and our thinking pool. They challenge our narrowness and our myopia of mind. The contribution of this type of intellectual to the human story can be carried forward in trust like a priceless cultural resource.
Indeed we stand on the shoulders of giants. Linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues strongly against the possibility of a private language. Hermeneutics shows us that a game has been in progress when we arrived on the scene and that we are entering a discourse, a conversation already in play. He would strongly challenge today’s students to learn the various language games that flourish—a good word for interdisciplinary study or liberal arts education as a foundation to any discipline. At least we should understand the philosophical history of our subject. One of the great opportunities of graduate school is to enrich our linguistic grasp of reality, to become aware of the different voices impacting culture, both within and beyond our discipline. One might be surprised that a mentor in Mechanical Engineering could also have a PhD in Fine Arts or Philosophy.

Academia is to some extent a dialectic, a dialogue and debate with the grands pensées (great minds) of the past and present. Hermeneutics specialist Anthony Thiselton from University of Nottingham affirms that speech has a role in defining this relationality. My fellow interlocutors are also crucial to my ongoing grasp of self-understanding and self-discovery. It does not mean that I always have to agree with them, but they make me more human, add more depth and dimensionality to my existence. To leave all interlocution communities is to attempt to leap out of the human condition and completely reinvent myself. It is most dangerous indeed.

Now more than ever, we need to include the global conversation partners such as Al Gore (2013, The Future: six drivers of global change). To be educated in today’s world, means getting involved in this dialogue and these global concerns as well, in order to grapple with our larger context and the problems that are to be solved, not just in the sciences. It can be quite surprising to see how common, and how different, are the concerns from various countries and continents. International students have a distinct advantage here. We can learn from differences of world and different ideological perspectives. Graduate students, especially PhD students, increasingly are expected to become global citizens; they are encouraged to choose their conversation partners wisely, and continually seek out good mentors on the journey. This is why we are constantly trolling for good resource people and recommending reading to graduate students; it builds their soul, their self-identity and their world perspective. It is essential to their future leadership.

There is an important case study in the importance of language in world-making (perception-shaping). In the CBC Series called The Myth of the Secular, David Cayley and his guests open up for re-examination the Western language of the secular. It is rooted in the grand discourse of Charles Taylor in his prize-winning tome A Secular Age. James K.A. Smith (2014) has done an excellent job of providing an introduction to this grand treatise—how to read Taylor, and in turn read culture. This excellent series shows the value of high-minded, circumspect interlocutors. A good example is British intellectual John Milbank who claims that we have to adopt either religion or nihilism, that a secular humanism doesn’t hold water. Science was never designed to be a worldview. These great thinkers don't buy the traditional thesis of secularization (based on flattened, one-dimensional, ideological secularism) that involves the subtraction theory of religion: i.e. as science grows, religion disappears. We have discussed this in the opening essay. Today religion is flourishing throughout the world. Charles Taylor is
aware of the *transcendent condition* of our having a grasp on our own language, especially as we explore the *expressive-poetic* tradition of language. We often discover this phenomenon in dialogue (C. Taylor, 1989, p. 37), when pushed to the wall by colleagues who disagree with our personal convictions or reasoning. Language is so embedded in our identity that we have a hard time transcending it without dialogue with others of a different worldview. We must celebrate what other language games and metaphors, figures of speech, can illuminate. Language articulates a way of seeing, a posture, an outlook. It is never free from many assumptions or metaphysics. It can also be quite political even in the sciences.

To continue on our discussion of identity formation, we suggest that a return to transcendence is central to the recovery of language from its flatness and the recovery of one’s identity as George Steiner (*Real Presences*, 1991) notes. Unlike Nietzsche and Foucault, who produce a literature of aesthetic escape from the self, transcendence of the self in Charles Taylor's relationship to the good offers a different model. It helps us escape identification with any one particular voice in the conversation, making us more sophisticated dialogue partners. It means that we are able to step beyond our own place and to understand ourselves and the Other as playing a part in the whole, to see ourselves from the perspective of the whole. This allows for the development of ‘common space’. We can be involved in *communicative action* (Jurgen Habermas). As Taylor puts it, “Some of the most crucial human fulfillments are not possible even in principle for a sole human being.... Our sense of good and sense of self are deeply interwoven and they connect with the way we are agents who share a language with other agents” (C. Taylor, 1989, pp. 40, 41). We know how good this feels when we genuinely commune and connect with others, when there is a resonance with other minds, even while we debate them.

Taylor notes that the contemporary quest for meaning, identity or fullness can be met by building something into one’s life, some pattern of higher action or excellence, a connection with the good. This is a path out of nihilism. It can be met by connecting one’s life with some greater reality or story, or both (Ibid. p. 46). Ultimately for the believer in *agape* love, one’s conversation with God and his saints brings into play this transcendence of identity, this larger horizon of meaning. Here one is using language in a very fruitful and positive way, a richer even a healing way, tapping into a special life-giving heritage, which gives perspective on the struggles of the present. It gives life, significance and energy to our story to tap into a larger narrative. *Strong* transcendence (Calvin Schrag 1997) means we are becoming more, better persons, not just different. We are reaching higher, nobler aspirations so to speak.

Identity formation is also about using language to self-interpret, to articulate, discover and define self. We must constantly answer the question, ‘Who am I and what do I stand for and what am I able to contribute?’ There is an important implication of the sociality of the self that is forwarded by Taylor (Ibid. p. 34). Contrary to the traditional view in behaviourist social science, the self is not an object or substance in the usually understood sense. We are not selves in the way we are organisms and we don’t have selves in the way we have livers and lungs. As Taylor points out, it is a fundamentally misguided question to ask what a person is in abstraction from his or her self-
interpretation. This dynamic self-interpretation is worked out in community through a language conversation and a story, a commitment to the good and the common good. It helps an individual know where they stand, and how they are accepted as a valid articulation of various identity questions and orientation within society. These identity questions are vital to everyone, not just an ethnic minority. We remember a caption in a graduation yearbook from Queen’s University that said, “It takes many walks with a friend along the lake before you can figure out who you are.” Reflecting on one’s life in a natural context and with a good friend gives critical perspective on who we are.

With this richer text understanding the broader richness of language and identity, there emerges a fullness of self within a social space, a self that is conscious of a narrative and a history. This is extremely hopeful for late moderns, full of prospects for personal growth and a meaningful calling. Our next move beyond nihilism is to grapple with the recovery of the language of incarnational humanism, an ancient tradition that informs the present with tremendous cultural dynamics (Jens Zimmermann, 2012a, and 2012b). This will involve a theological-philosophical-anthropological discussion to cap our dialogue on the Escape from Nihilism. It will flesh out some of the suggested anthropological adjustments we have hinted at thus far, and continue to push towards fullness of being and consciousness. There is also something beautiful emerging here as we awake from our slumber; it makes the spine tingle and returns us to a sense of wonder.
10. The Cosmic Refusal of Nihilism: Towards an Incarnational Humanism

As we move beyond nihilism, we long to see culture reformed, heritage maintained, lives made whole, identities brimming with meaning. From one perspective, we want our full humanity back; we want the big picture on who we are, where we are and what is our potential. Our experiment for two centuries with modernity has stolen or buried a critical part of our heritage. We believe that the following discussion will help us chart our course through late modernity’s somewhat dangerous waters. One senses at times that is like that last section of the climb to Everest; it has us living on the edge.

What is the discourse that can locate this renewal towards wholeness? Is it to be found in the language of *incarnational humanism*, an ancient tradition with many modern implications? It has a scholarly reach all the way back to Augustine. Language is an important means of God’s prophetic engagement with humans, the infinite in communion with the finite, all the while expanding the horizons of the finite, making the secular more real. There is a profound significance about the Creator in dialogue with his creature, with his creation. We see this communication writ large in the incarnation; it is astonishingly important and yet often neglected today. How else can we see to engage *agape* love and the goodness of the divine in the fullest sense? What other hope do we have? The incarnation is a great *gift* (a bridge) to us humans; it is meant to draw us upwards into a new dimension of life, a new caliber of thinking, to expand our horizons, as the Hubble space telescope expanded our sight out into 13.8 billion light years of universe.

D. Stephen Long does an excellent effort of showing the complexity and nuances of this outlook in his important book *Speaking of God*. We return to our musings about faith and ways of reasoning.

> The certainties which the church has received as a gift require its participation in humanity’s “common struggle” to attain truth. The human search for truth, which is philosophy’s vocation, is not set in opposition to theology’s reception of truth as gift. What we struggle to understand by reason we also receive by faith. No dichotomy exists between the certainties of faith and the common struggle by human reason to attain truth ... The truths humanity seeks by common reason (philosophy) and the certainties of faith can be placed over against each other such that each illuminates the other and renders it intelligible until the two ultimately become one, which is of course what the incarnation does in reverse. The concretion of the one Person [the Christ] illuminates the natures of both divinity and humanity. (D. S. Long, 2009, p. 87)

British hermeneutics philosopher Anthony Thiselton says that the mystery of the incarnation is too profound for human discovery alone; it requires transcendent revelation and interpretation. It is too much to imagine through human reason alone. But reason meets revelation and can help us fathom its profundity.

Christians claim Jesus as God’s Word (*divine logos*) made flesh, dwelling among us. Here God’s speech is embodied, full-blooded, not flat and lifeless, not reductionistic or atomistic. It is a sign, a *communicative action* (Kevin Vanhoozer, 2009), much more than the mere letters. It is poetic, prophetic, pedagogical, full of spiritual vitality revealed in a tangible historic person. The language of incarnation leverages the world and transforms
individuals; it is strategically located within the human story, not a fantasy. The incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution (loss of connection between word and world). There is much to grapple with as we see in Jens Zimmermann’s scholarship on the subject.

Christ the creative wisdom of God, and God’s active Word in creation, is enfleshed in the temporal-historical dimension of our world as the concrete Jewish Messiah, Jesus the Christ. This is the Word through whom all things were made, and the Word hid in the eternal bosom of God, the Word who spoke through the prophets, the Word whose mighty acts defined the history of Israel. In Jesus the Christ this Word has become flesh, and the eternal has become temporal, but without ceasing to be eternal. In Christ temporality and eternity are conjoined. In the incarnation, creation, the world, time and history have been taken up into the God-man, who is the center of reality. Faith and reason are inseparable because their unity is in Christ. (J. Zimmermann, 2012a, pp. 264-5)

Language (speech act) starts with creation: God spoke and the heavens, the stars, the seas, the plants and living creatures, man and woman came into existence in abundance. They continue to do so (creatio continua). God’s word was enacted in a particular place and time in history. It makes space for new drama. There is intense presence and place; God has carved out space and time for his presence. When humans are addressed by God (the whole premise of Judeo-Christianity), they are drawn up into a divine dialogue, to reason and commune with their Creator, their ultimate mentor. They are identified, loved and valued. A perlocutionary act is a robust speech act that produces an effect in those addressed through the speaker’s utterance. God speech has impact in all of human culture. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (R. Gawronski, 1995, Word and Silence) sees the Word of God revealed in three rich and powerful ways: Creation, Scripture, and Incarnation, three different types of language, each powerful in its own right, each complementary to the integrity and impact of the others, using both traditions of language culture. The incarnation is God’s megaphone to late modernity with all its challenges, conundrums, contradictions and struggles.

By addressing us in person, God calls us ‘upwards’ into full human being, imago dei, agape love, beings with a higher, denser meaning, image bearers, culture makers, gardeners and artists (Andy Crouch, 2008), responsible agents, stewards of creation. This offers a tremendous personal and cultural driver for both the individual good and common good. Many people sense God calling them to be something or someone more that they are (blowing their imagination), perhaps even to launch a journey or follow a quest. That is a sign of being addressed by, encountered by transcendence, by presence. It shows us the more of language and life, the more of our humanity, of our flourishing. We often question whether the immanent frame is enough for our thoughts and musings, our imagination. We are haunted by transcendence.

New qualitative shape emerges in our identity as we break free of our intense self-absorption and worry about our career. This dialogue with God re-interprets us afresh: we are investigated, challenged, moved and motivated by divine speech, divine whisperings and nudges. Are we not hard wired for receiving and responding to this speech? Andy Crouch writes, “Making sense of the wonder and the terror of the world is the original human preoccupation. And it is the deepest sense of culture that most clearly
distinguishes us from all the rest of creation” (A. Crouch, 2008, p. 24). It is impossible to fully invent or make sense of life-world on our own. On our own, without transcendence, we are left with nihilism, not humanism (John Milbank). Should we not take time for higher thoughts in higher education, to listen to our deepest yearnings?

God is speaking. Christ is the conduit of God’s love—the culmination and fulfilment of every philosophical, spiritual and moral aspiration (Colossians 1). The Christ story is the climax of God’s compassionate redemptive interest in humanity. He is God’s infinite goodness embodied, God’s very self. If there is a true possibility for robust human flourishing, it begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged once again between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks (James Davison Hunter, 2010). The divine language is personal and it is absolutely transformative. It offers a renewal of orientation of cosmos to the human; we find our home in the vast universe.

Christianity is the participation in the life of God and in his presence, a presence as defined by Christ as true human image bearer. The incarnation (John 1:1-5, 14; Colossians 1:15-20) in particular provides a vision and a grounding to restore the late modern broken relationships and cynicism. The wounded healer shows us how to heal. The Advent, life, teaching, sacrificial death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ offers a profound new articulation of humanity, an inspiration, a hermeneutical breakthrough, a gripping and tantalizing call to a higher life. It also poses all sorts of questions to push out the boundaries of what it means to be human, to expand identity.

Transcendent divine goodness is present and accessible in the human sphere through the incarnation. Transcendence does not therefore mean aloofness and indifference, or a burdensome or unreachable abstract standard of perfection. It is rather a creative, palpable engagement with the world (society and its institutions). Transcendent divine goodness takes on an historical and christological determination in order to impact the human moral and cultural world. By reading the moral life through the life of Christ, one cannot espouse a minimalist and juridical conception of a life that merely acts on what is permitted or forbidden. We find a moral discourse, a moral life that makes sense in the light of a Christ who is fullness of goodness, who incarnates infinite transcendent goodness in human flesh. D. S. Long (2001) appeals to the robust moral normativity of the life of Jesus.

In Christian theology, Jesus reveals to us not only who God is but also what it means to be truly human. This true humanity is not something we achieve on our own; it comes to us as a gift ... The reception of this gift contains an ineliminable element of mystery that will always require faith. Jesus in his life, teaching, death and resurrection and ongoing presence in the church and through the Holy Spirit ... orders us towards God. He directs our passions and desires towards that which can finally fulfill them and bring us happiness ... [and] reveal to us what it means to be human. (D.S. Long, 2001, pp. 106-7)

The life of the self is lived not autonomously but in collaboration with divine goodness. Goodness is made accessible, personal and real; it is transcendent goodness expressed within the immanent frame (Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew). We see this powerfully expressed in the following poem by Edwin Muir called “The Incarnate One”.
The Incarnate One

Edwin Muir

The windless northern surge, the sea-gull's scream, And Calvin's kirk crowning the barren brae. I think of Giotto the Tuscan shepherd's dream, Christ, man and creature in their inner day. How could our race betray The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?

The Word made flesh here is made word again A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook. See there King Calvin with his iron pen, And God three angry letters in a book, And there the logical hook On which the Mystery is impaled and bent Into an ideological argument.

There's better gospel in man's natural tongue, And truer sight was theirs outside the Law Who saw the far side of the Cross among The archaic peoples in their ancient awe, In ignorant wonder saw The wooden cross-tree on the bare hillside, Not knowing that there a God suffered and died.

The fleshless word, growing, will bring us down, Pagan and Christian man alike will fall, The auguries say, the white and black and brown, The merry and the sad, theorist, lover, all Invisibly will fall: Abstract calamity, save for those who can Build their cold empire on the abstract man.

A soft breeze stirs and all my thoughts are blown Far out to sea and lost. Yet I know well The bloodless word will battle for its own Invisibly in brain and nerve and cell. The generations tell Their personal tale: the One has far to go Past the mirages and the murdering snow.

The incarnation offers a transcendent turn to a new kind of humanism (centered in agape love), a new society as articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced the surreal fragmentation, disintegration of self and society in the nihilism (sinister cynicism) of Nazi Germany in the early twentieth century. Relativism definitely led to will to power leadership and truth was subverted by propaganda.

To be realistic, to live authentically in the world and before God, is to live as if the whole of reality has already been drawn up into and held together in Christ…. [It is] a fundamental hermeneutical claim to participate realistically and responsibly in the reconciliation of humanity in Christ. (Bonhoeffer, DBWE, 6: 55, 223)

There is no room for dualism in incarnational thinking. He came to heal and unify humanity, not to fragment, not to separate faith and reason, body and spirit, natural and supernatural. Incarnation affirms and elevates the whole human, brings heaven and earth together. Jens Zimmermann, a Bonhoeffer specialist, writes (2012a, p. 275): “Bonhoeffer is a Christian humanist because he regards full humanity as the ultimate goal of God’s work in Christ.” Zimmermann has a strong scholarly track record of recovering the language of Christian humanism from its earliest days to the current era (see especially Humanism and Religion: a call for the renewal of western culture. 2012b) Bonhoeffer’s thought is at the heart of his discourse on humanism.

There is a second aspect of incarnation, beyond Jesus’ particular presence on earth; it is God the Son’s presence in his church today. The church community offers an historical and cultural presence, performance and embodiment of God’s goodness, socially locating
divine goodness in a human community and narrative. Christoph Schwöbel (1992, p. 76) notes that divine goodness, a communion of love in itself, “finds its social form in the community of believers as the reconstituted form of life of created and redeemed sociality.” Cambridge theologian D.W. Hardy (2001, p. 75) underlines that the task of the church is to face into “the irreducible density of the goodness that is God in human society.” It is to communicate and mediate, finally to incarnate, this goodness in society. Goodness is empowered in the human theatre and human relationships; it comes as prophetic speech in many forms.

The incarnation, which is all about presence, answers some of the deep issues and problems in our great cultural transition from early to late modernity: affirming speech, the body/the physical, and the self/agency. Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter formulates an intriguing and constructive theology of faithful presence for the contemporary witness of the church (J.D. Hunter, 2010, pp. 238-54.) God uses this language to communicate to humans within the immanent frame that he identifies with them: his message is the offer of life marked by goodness, peace, truth, beauty, joy, fruitfulness—the shalom of an enriched flourishing. Shalom offers something to society at large (Ibid. p. 228) “a vision of order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy and well-being.” In this sense, “Christians are to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those in the community of faith, but to all” (Ibid, p. 230). The shalom of God is the presence of God (Ephesians 2:14). Incarnation means that Christians are mandated with bringing this faithful presence to their circle of influence. It is sacrificial agape:

Pursuit, identification, the offer of life through sacrificial love—this is what God’s faithful presence means. It is a quality of commitment that is active, not passive; intentional, not accidental; covenantal, not contractual. In the life of Christ we see how it entailed his complete attention. It was a whole-hearted, not half-hearted; focused and purposeful, nothing desultory about it. His very name, Immanuel, signifies all of this—“God with us”—in our presence. (J.D. Hunter, 2010, p. 243)

It is the in-breaking of new relationships within the framework of the old. It is the potential source of all human callings to meaningful work and contribution. This offers a means to credibly rewrite the story of late modernity.

When the word of all flourishing—defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relations with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our sphere of influence—absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy. (Ibid. p. 252)

Thereby, one’s own grappling with identity within this plausibility structure is seen to involve the flourishing of the Other (human and divine), the honoring of the Other, as well as receiving from the Other in mutuality, in a communion of love. The Other changes in significance: from a competitive threat (a potential dominator in the world of will to power and disciplinary practices) in Foucault’s ethics, to an esteemed opportunity of mutuality with unlimited relational potential—complementarity. We move from fear and mistrust to delightful cooperation of well-being. The Other is highly valued as an end in herself. Life is not about a self-justifying control, remaining alone in self-sufficiency,
but in seeking out a communion of love, a healthy vulnerability, interdependency and mutuality, with an ear to the voice of the Other. It is a dialogue laced with \textit{agape}.

The self, in this case, discovers and constructs within community, with a moral inclusiveness rather than a pursuit of radical autonomy and chronic distrust in radical individualism. A. McFadyen (1995) offers a helpful reflection on this point concerning the deceptions and distortions of radical freedom.

\begin{quote}
The free pursuit of private self-interest has a naturally conflicting form, since the otherness of the individual means their interests must be opposed. One needs freedom from what is other in order to be oneself. Personal centeredness is essential, for autonomy is a private place that has to be protected by fencing it off from the sphere of relation and therefore from the otherness of God and one’s neighbours ... Autonomy is something one has in self-possession, apart from relation to God and others in an exclusive and private orientation on an asocial personal centre ... Freedom and autonomy are had apart from relationship: they inhere within oneself. (A. McFadyen, 1995, p. 35)
\end{quote}

Jurgen Habermas problematizes this preoccupation with the autonomy or self-mastery as simply a moment in the process of social interaction, which has often been artificially isolated or privileged:

\begin{quote}
Both cognitive-instrumental mastery of an objective nature (and society) and a narcissistically overinflated autonomy (in the sense of purposively rational self-assertion) are derivative moments that have been rendered independent from the communicative structures of the lifeworld, that is, from the intersubjectivity of relationships of mutual understanding and relationships of reciprocal recognition. (J. Habermas, 1987, p. 315)
\end{quote}

However fragile or imperfect this incarnation of trinitarian goodness appears in Christian community, it is no less profound for the transformation of the self according to a strong transcendence of depth. Human creatures are called upward morally and spiritually to image and give witness to the dynamic being and activity of the triune God. This imaging transforms the moral vision of the self in a dynamic way, and enhances human possibilities for action towards the good of the Other and the good of society. That most poignant image of hope, the Kingdom of God, expresses the relation of free divine love and loving human freedom together in depicting the ultimate purpose of God’s action as the perfected community of love with his creation. (C. Schwöbel, 1995, p. 80)

This entails a transcendent moral turn for the self, beyond reductionism offered by ideological scientism, beyond fear of domination and mutual competition (\textit{agonisme}) of poststructuralism. It goes beyond pursuit of self-indulgence (an anti-humanist stance), to a pro-humanist, self-giving love and mutual support. The church at its best, as Christ’s representatives on earth, produces people on a quest for goodness of this quality, and seek to mediate this transcendent goodness in society; it still believes that God speaks and acts, that the triune God is present to the world, that it is vital to love this personal Good and be loved by him, vital to seek the divine personal Good and be sought by him.

Redeemed freedom flourishes within a transcendent trinitarian horizon. Trinitarian divine goodness proves to be a fruitful plausibility structure within which to think differently about freedom and the moral self. Trinitarian goodness-freedom answers some of the concerns in the Foucauldian aesthetic self and reveals new opportunities for identity,
discovery, transformation and exploration. It also adds sophistication and meaning to some of Taylor’s categories around the recovery of the language and horizon of the good. It is in the life of Jesus as a member of the Trinity that one can visualize this goodness-freedom dynamic most transparently.

It implies a transcendence which resides outside the economies of human experience, and human culture spheres of science, art, religion and ethics, and yet it plays a key role in the drama of self-constitution within those spheres. It offers a significant contribution to the validation, affirmation, and recognition of the self from a larger horizon of significance, creating a new range of possibilities and deeper roots in a strong Christian humanist tradition. It also occasions a standpoint for an evaluation of beliefs and practices, offering a subject position from which to protest the unexamined hegemony of the aesthetic present in Foucault’s hermeneutics of the moral self. This hegemony, along with the hegemony of science, is resisted through an exploration of the horizons of the good, moving the self beyond many of its late modern restrictions.

The discussion of recovering ethics as a partnership with trinitarian relationality is highlighted in Jesus. He offers an example of redeemed human freedom, through the cooperation between divine goodness and human freedom, effecting an empowerment and a maturing of human freedom. At this juncture, it will be fruitful to explore the marriage of the good (transcendently rooted and qualified) and freedom. Jesus’ life constitutes the reconciliation of, rather than the enmity between, goodness and freedom; transcendent goodness energizes and impacts his expression of freedom in the human society context. In the philosophical turn towards transcendent goodness, freedom as an ontology is subverted by the ontology of agape love, or divine trinitarian goodness.

It also renders problematic the seeking of the good or goodness apart from seeking God, the pursuit of the good while walking away from relationship to God. It transforms ethics, within the economy of human relations, from a contest within a general will to power (nihilism), to the economy of grace within a communion of agape love. At its worst, the institutional church can obfuscate this goodness as well, reneging on its most fundamental mandate and opportunity for impact on society. At its best, caring Christian community is profound, tangible and authentic, rescuing the broken, the poor, the vulnerable, challenging each other to the lived goodness, to life-enhancement.

Human freedom, claims Alister McFadyen (1995), is grounded in and defined by, God’s freedom; there is no necessary competition between these two freedoms.

God’s inmost being is constituted by the radical mutuality of the three divine Persons, in which they both give and receive their individuality from one another. In their intersubjectivity, there is the creative intention and recognition of subjectivity, and therefore transcendence in form of the integrity of personal identity, in the giving of space to one another. This giving of space is an interpersonal event, and must not be thought of as analogous to the evacuation of physical space. It is not a form of absence, but a way of being present with others in creative recognition of their autonomy within the relationship. It is a letting-be, rather than a letting-go: a structuring of the relationship so that it includes space and time for personal discreteness and autonomous response. Thus the trinitarian life involves a circulation of the divine potentialities of being through the processes of self-giving, in the unity of which the three Persons receive their distinct personal identities. (A. McFadyen, 1995, pp. 46-7)
Within this plausibility structure, the roots for the ethical life, the transcendent condition for this life, lie in God. Jesus and his followers offer the dynamic unity between the transcendent and the temporal, the absolute and the contingent, the ultimate and the immanent. Humans are drawn upward into this new conversation and life-giving posture. The relational goodness of God is discovered not by means of a mere abstract speculation but in human lives oriented toward God, subjectivity engaged and inspired by the needs of the human Other, as well as by the goodness of God. Therefore, the first human life to consider for this position of hope is the life of Jesus. This is an encounter, which provides transformation of the self. The focus is on love not power; love speaks to power and transforms power (Andy Crouch 2013, Playing God). God is the guarantor or underwriter of its power and effectiveness, of this renewed identity.

The identity of trinitarian Persons is strengthened, not weakened or lost, through mutuality; this knowledge stimulates the human imagination of the possibilities for relationships and the dynamics of the moral self. The sheer joy and freedom of this mutuality within the Trinity is not confined. Lively self-giving freedom is revealed as possibility and reality within divine relationships; it involves mutual indwelling of identities, mutual support, perichoretic freedom. It provides an example of interpersonal relations that do not need to threaten the individual self or its freedom, but which enhance and empower the individual self and give direction to its freedom—towards the Other, in communion.

This is the same gift of benevolent divine freedom that is expressed within human creation, particularly through the presence in the world of God the Son and God the Spirit, the second and third Persons of the Trinity. God is a community of Persons in movement towards and present within creation, stimulating and opening up a future of new possibilities for human freedom and identity with purpose and hope. The transcendence of the trinitarian Creator includes free personal presence and free indwelling in history, revealing the potential of a definition of freedom which is rescued from the obsession with the blasphemy of radical autonomy. It is a counter-story. It is the kind of freedom that begins as a mutuality interpreted in trinitarian terms; it then proceeds towards a rethinking, a relocation of the self through a realignment of self with God’s freedom, a new interface of self with the transcendent horizon of goodness-freedom. The new subject position is informed by, bounded by and rooted in, divine freedom and the relational dimensions of creation, rather than standing over against or aloof from it. That’s a lot to grasp.

A. McFadyen (1995) illuminates some nuances of the divine-human interface of freedom, revealed through the incarnation.

[By] incarnation in the body of the crucified one implies that God’s freedom does not, after all, entail a transcendent aloofness from the world, but a form of involvement with it in which the divine being and freedom are staked. God subjects Godself to the risks, vulnerabilities and ambiguities of historical existence, including the risk of rejection, suffering and death, as well as of misinterpretation. God’s freedom and sovereignty must be of a radical kind: the freedom to give oneself in relation; to be with and in creation in ways that are costly to God, but which do not abrogate God’s sovereignty, freedom and transcendence. (p. 42)
In the incarnation, one sees God communicating and relating, not as a tyrannical, coercive, absolute sovereign, but vulnerably in and through the form of human individual, by uniting the divine freedom of self-giving *agape* love with that of a human being within human community. In the Christ event, one is confronted with a divine power that is highly personal, and which consequently has impact through forms of interpersonal communication and personal presence. This God posture makes creative appeal to human freedom; divine freedom is the context of human freedom. It is not a divine monologue of commands, but a dialogue in which humans are intended and respected as subjects with choice. Jesus is in constant dialogue with the Father. His life is one of sacrificial servanthood to humanity, *agape* love writ large (I John 4).
Concluding Remarks: Promoting a Vision for University Research

What are the implications of the incarnation (*God with us*) one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith for graduate students? What of their identity, their posture and their voice on campus? Incarnation is “where God’s eternity and creation’s temporality meet” (D. Stephen Long, 2009, *Speaking of God*, p. 86). There is no simple answer, but it is great territory to explore, good soil to turn over and over again. If indeed Jesus is the wisdom of God and the power of God, the reason, the telos or goal of everything (Colossians 1), it would be terribly wrong to keep this a secret from our colleagues, or to totally repress it in our academic endeavors. If we are able to say ‘Jesus is Lord’ with respect to our studies and our relationships (Romans 8), that will begin to transform them and give us fresh motivation, creativity and energy. This is a highly fruitful experiment to run, highly fruitful lines of research to explore using the best scholarship that today’s academics haven to offer. It offers something special to academic community, leveraging the full weight of *agape*. We have been on a journey in this discussion to escape Nihilism and discover our home in a bigger, more beautiful and adventurous world.

Language is a divine *gift* to human persons, a most wonderful, powerful, formidable and sometimes dangerous gift. D. Stephen Long encourages us that we can escape Nihilism for something better.

Good philosophy, philosophy that does not seek to close us off from the world in some tight, immanent reality, will remain open to receiving this gift, a gift that can be found in language, but never identified with it. Philosophy should be the love of wisdom that prompts persons to use reason in the quest for truth, goodness and beauty.... Philosophy and theology have distinct tasks, but those tasks cannot be delineated solely in terms of nature and supernature or reason and faith. There must be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.... Theology comes as gift communicating God’s goodness to creatures for their own perfection, showing them their imperfection” (D.S. Long, 2009, pp. 83, 207, 316).

Scholars work with grammar, figure of speech, assumptions, dispositions, theories and a whole variety of linguistic practice. We ought to explore enjoy this language to the full, for the common good of society, to build up moral capital, to promote shalom. We give thanks to God for offering us mere mortals access to this high level of calling and community, this high level of international, inter-collegiate interlocution. We need to find our voice and our full identity within the incarnational word made flesh, the word that underwrites all human language and speech. This will provide us with an edge in our work, new interlocutors that can free us from the grip of too narrow a perspective on research, life, self and relational reality. To close ourselves off, to implode into a minimalist or reductionist language game, or to try to articulate all aspects of life with scientific language alone, to refuse theological, poetic, artistic and philosophical speech is a tragedy. It is to be in denial of this richer, common human heritage, this larger brilliant linguistic and moral horizon, these thicker perceptions of human identity, to refuse our full humanity. It is to deprive us of the full academic and personal adventure.
Finally, poet-pastor Eugene Peterson speaks to this issue of words. It can be seen as a benediction on our important musing over these past several pages. It is a good last word on the trajectory we have followed and fought for in late modern Western culture.

Christian followers of Jesus have an urgent mandate to care for language—spoken, heard, written—as a means by which God reveals himself to us, by which we express the truth and allegiance of our lives, and by which we give witness to the Word made flesh …. Contemporary language has been dessicated by the fashions of the academic world (reductive rationalism) and the frenzy of industrial and economic greed (reductive pragmatism). The consequence is that much of the talk in our time has become, well, just talk—not much theological content to it, not much personal relationship involved, no spirit, no Holy Spirit …. We need a feel for vocabulary and syntax that is able to detect and delete disembodied ideas, language that fails to engage personal participation. We need a thorough grounding in the robustness of biblical story and grammar that insists on vital articulated speech (not just the employment of words) for the health of the body and mind and soul …. Words don’t just sit there, like bumps on a log. They have agency. Scott Cairns, reflecting on his work as a poet working with words in the context of a believing community reading the Scriptures, says that we “are attending not only to a past (an event to which the words refer), but are attending to a present and a presence (which the words articulate into proximity for their apprehension)... leaning into that articulate presence, participating in its energies, and thereby participating in the creation of meaning, with which we help to shape the future. (E. Peterson, 2007, 67-8)
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