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Authenticity, Fragilization, and Cross-Pressure in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Charles Taylor's analysis in *A Secular Age*, with a focus on the concepts of authenticity, fragilization and cross-pressure. I explore the ethic of authenticity in relation to the ontological instability produced by exclusive humanism and consider how fragilization and cross-pressure reflect the fragmentation of our relation to the spiritual. At the same time, I engage with critical responses to Taylor that challenge his claims about authenticity and question the coherence and universality of fragilization and cross-pressure as social and cultural phenomena. I conclude that Taylor's account of authenticity is fundamentally ambivalent, as it reproduces the rigid distinction between immanence and transcendence that the ethic of authenticity itself seeks ostensibly to destabilize.

Keywords: Charles Taylor; *A Secular Age*; religion; authenticity; exclusive humanism

1. Introduction

In his monumental work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2010a) develops a complex narrative to show how changes in the conditions of belief have fundamentally transformed our relation to religion and spirituality. The concepts of authenticity, fragilization, and cross-pressure occupy a central place in this account. They serve to pinpoint Taylor's central narrative that we should consider secularization as merely the decline of faith but through the radical transformation on the conditions of belief. Taylor argues that post-Durkheimian societies are characterized not by the decline of religion or the disappearance of faith but by a radical transformation brought about by the pluralization of spiritual options. This transformation is driven by the radical detachment of spirituality from its traditional social contexts, a condition to which I devote particular attention.

Taylor's account of secularity is an influential but contested diagnosis within a broader field that includes competing accounts of belief and authentic ways of being in the world (Cooke 2021; Joas 2024). The aim of this paper is to show that, although authenticity constitutes a structurally novel phenomenon of the secular age, Taylor's analysis is marked by a persistent ambivalence. This ambivalence, I argue, stems from his oscillation between an ontological concern with transcendence and a sociological account of the changing conditions of belief. Taylor's account of authenticity reproduces a fundamental ambiguity by framing it through a rigid antithesis between immanence and transcendence. As a result, Taylor's central concern is less the empirical diffusion of authenticity as a sociological phenomenon than the question of whether authenticity can still function, within a secular horizon, as a genuine site of aspiration to transcendence. It is precisely this concern that generates the ambivalent character of his account of secular modernity. In a similar way, Taylor elevates fragilization and cross-pressure as objective features of the secular age



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through the construction of polarized ideal types, organized around an opposition between extreme positions.

This paper does not follow Taylor in claiming that authenticity—or what Taylor terms “fullness”—is impossible without a supernatural or theistic point of reference. Taylor nonetheless offers a distinctive and powerful diagnosis on transformation of the conditions of belief, the experience of values and meaning, and the fragility of religious and spiritual life in contemporary secular society. His relevance is both methodological and substantive. Taylor’s relevance is therefore methodological as much as substantive. His work challenges both triumphalist narratives of secularization and reductive critiques of religion, by refusing to treat spiritual meaning as a mere epiphenomenon of social utility or psychological consolation. At the same time, it resists nostalgic or reactionary attempts to restore premodern forms of religious authority or sacral unity. This resistance helps explain why Taylor treats contemporary authenticity as an ambivalent phenomenon, one that simultaneously enables new forms of self-articulation while contributing to the fragmentation and instability of moral values and spiritual horizons. As [Jennifer Herdt \(2014\)](#) notes, Taylor’s position reflects a “nuanced appreciation of authenticity and personal, committed faith” in Taylor’s view (p. 213). Yet this ambivalence also raises a further difficulty concerning Taylor’s own normative stance. His preference for transcendence, often articulated through explicitly Christian imagery, has been criticized as overly partisan or insufficiently justified on philosophical grounds. Critics argue that Taylor’s account risks being shaped by his personal commitment to Christian faith rather than by arguments capable of broader philosophical assent. By contrast, more pragmatic or naturalistic accounts of moral and existential orientation may offer alternative forms of authenticity without recourse to transcendent or theistic anchors ([Hart 2012](#)).

However, Taylor remains a crucial interlocutor in contemporary debates on secularization and spiritual life in contemporary life, even for those who ultimately reject his normative conclusions. His work should not be read merely as a “theistic” intervention but as a sophisticated phenomenological reconstruction of how late modern subjects experience meaning, value, and spiritual tension. As [Abbey](#) has recently argued in her comparison of Taylor and Steven Pinker, the debate between naturalistic position and theistic perspectives need not be understood as an irreconcilable divide but as opening a shared space for articulating experiences of moral and existential concern that do not fully align with either position ([Abbey 2023](#), p. 84). In this sense, authenticity in Taylor’s work designates a “middle space” in which individuals experiment with value, meaning, and forms of spiritual engagement. Taylor’s contribution, then, lies less in settling the question of transcendence than in clarifying the stakes of the problem itself. His work renders visible the fundamental tension of modernity between the immanent grounding of meaning and rationality and the enduring experience of loss, fragility, and existential instability, a tension that continues to structure contemporary efforts to live authentically in a secular age.

2. Religious Transformation in the Post-Durkheimian Age

The crucial aspect of Taylor’s analysis in *A Secular Age* is the radical transformation in our conception of religious faith brought about in secular modernity through the rise of exclusive humanism as a moral alternative to the moral, social, and cosmic imaginary of Christendom ([Charles Taylor 2010a](#), pp. 19–20, 26). Taylor seeks to explain how the conditions of belief have changed, rather than why religion has declined.¹ In Taylor’s view, religion involves both the affirmation of a transcendent reality and the aspiration toward a transformative perspective that exceeds ordinary human flourishing ([Charles Taylor 2010a](#), pp. 510, 530). Exclusive humanism introduces a new framework for organizing society, one that prioritizes individual freedom and mutual beneficence through the establishment of

universal rules. This condition enforces uniformity through the rationalization of actions and involves a radical redefinition of our understanding of the human good, which frames human flourishing as a purely immanent task grounded in reason and inner-worldly activity closed to transcendence (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 88, 244–45, 636).

Taylor defines this condition as the “eclipse of transcendence,” which does not simply entail the negation of belief but the erosion of transcendence as a universally shared moral and spiritual framework (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 307, 309, 371). The eclipse of transcendence functions as a structural precondition of pluralization. As transcendence loses its structuring function, no single spiritual orientation can claim normative priority, and individuals are consequently compelled to explore alternative spiritual and existential options, thereby expanding the range of meaningful spiritual positions in the world. Yet, this very expansion also leads to “fragilization,” as the multiplicity of spiritual options undermines the stability of every single one. As a result, individuals often find themselves under cross-pressure, since they are pulled between competing moral and spiritual frameworks, and unable to fully inhabit any of them with unchallenged certainty:

Modern secularity . . . must be understood as this field of increasingly multiform contestation, in which every position is rendered uneasy and questionable because it can be challenged from many angles [. . .] I want to argue that we are moving toward a sort of “fragmentation” of the spiritual, in which in previous connection with whole societies, be this in the older medieval form of sacred monarchies or in the modern form of “civil religion,” is being strained to breaking point. We are entering a “post-Durkheimian” age. (Taylor 2010b, p. 306)

A major argument in *A Secular Age* is that the post-Durkheimian arrangement is not primarily seen as indicative of the decline of religion or the privatization of faith. Rather, it reflects the evolving role of religion in society and the continual reshaping of the spiritual landscape. Our relationship to religion is becoming increasingly detached from our allegiance to a particular political society or social collectivity, whether that society is a sacralized entity or a concrete national identity (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 489, 516). Secondly, the manner we feel and experience spirituality in secular modernity is significantly affected by what Taylor calls “expressive individualism” (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 487). Expressive individualism is not only a historical fact and a sociological condition; it is also pervasive as a moral motivation. The expressivist turn brought about by the Romantic movement reflects an individuating tendency, defined by the right of each person to choose and follow their own path of realizing their potential (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 69). Spiritual self-definition is pursued through inwardness and personal resonance, detached from the wider moral horizons that historically grounded such quests within the shared frameworks of religion or communal life. Our relationship with the spiritual is largely dominated by the fundamental value of authenticity. In particular, religious authenticity is defined as the individual’s inward turn to personal spiritual fulfillment and requires that spiritual choices align with the individual’s internal quest (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 299, 486, 759).

3. Religion, Secularity, and the Ethic of Authenticity

According to Taylor, A key aspect of this transformation is related to the shifting configuration of authority concerning religious commitment. Everyone has the freedom to invent their own personal and unique spiritual path, shaping the conditions of their spiritual expression through diverse personal practices that bypass conventional rules and traditional authorities (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 299). These developments sidestep any dimension beyond personal commitment and focus on the exploration of the here and now, leaving aside communal life or the aspiration to transcendence (Charles Taylor 2010a,

pp. 457, 507–8, 514). In this respect, the post-Durkheimian age is marked by a significant tension between forms of religion or spirituality that uphold authority—and often stand at odds with contemporary forms of spirituality—and emerging spiritual options that may encounter the need of relating to some form of authority.

More importantly, Taylor argues that these divisions are not unprecedented, drawing a parallel between our current era and the Reformation period of five centuries ago (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 510). To situate historically the origins of the ethic of authenticity, Taylor traces a genealogy that begins with the Reformation and extends through a series of developments within Latin Christendom. These include early modern conflicts such as those between the Jesuits and the Jansenists in seventeenth-century France, the tradition of *l'humanisme dévot* (“devout humanism”), and the dispute between the French Bishops Bossuet and Fénelon in the late seventeenth century (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 510–12). This line of argument appears to delineate a long trajectory within Latin Christendom, beginning about half a century ago, and extending through Calvinism, Jansenism, devout humanism, and Methodism, culminating in the tradition of the “born-again” Christian (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 532). It is precisely in this context that Taylor’s argument culminates in the abstract differentiation between “dwelling” and “seeking,” which he interprets as two contrasting modes of spiritual engagement. Taylor adapts this distinction from the sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow,² framing these terms as “two kinds of religious sensibility” and “two spiritual stances” (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 512). The juxtaposition of “spirituality” and “religion” already signals a cleavage between two divergent modes of engagement with the spiritual. In the contemporary context, modern seekers orient themselves toward the subjective and personalized dimensions of the individual quest, shaping a self-referential experience that accords primacy to spirituality over the institutional and doctrinal frameworks of religion (Bender 2016, pp. 292–93).

The spirituality of quest evident today may be understood as the expression this movement assumes within the Age of Authenticity. This tradition, which encourages or at least permits individual spiritual seeking, finds its contemporary expression in the proliferation of heterogeneous spiritual quests across North Atlantic societies (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 532–33). From this vantage point, it appears that Taylor understands the ethic of authenticity as the culmination of a centuries-long historical process, extending from the Reformation through the early modern period and into late modernity, toward increasingly individualized forms of religious devotion and practice. On this reading, the genealogy of authenticity in relation to religious commitment can be traced at least as far back as the early modern period, while the present moment is marked by its accelerated expansion and uncontrollable proliferation.

This exposes a weakness in Taylor’s analysis by introducing a lack of clarity regarding the historical scope of the ethic of authenticity. The difficulty lies in determining its historical origins and the extent to which it can be projected backward in time. This aspect of Taylor’s argument leads Ruth Abbey to assert that it is difficult to accept the claim that religious authenticity is an entirely novel phenomenon in our secular age. Abbey questions the novelty of the ethic of authenticity as a defining feature of post-Durkheimian secularity by arguing that, if authenticity can exist in pre-secular contexts, then it is not uniquely post-Durkheimian. A simple thought experiment could prompt us to consider the possibility of a society of believers in which the quest for authenticity remains viable (Abbey 2014, p. 104). From this perspective, our epoch is not as new as it may appear. The broader picture suggests continuity rather than rupture or radical transformation.

However, the central concern in Taylor’s genealogy is not the sociological contrast between affirming and rejecting authority, nor the valorization of individuality, but the manner in which we conceive our relation to God. Devout humanism represents a deeply

personal form of religious devotion that combines active engagement with the world and faithful dedication to God, grounded in self-reflection and trust in one's own intimations about faith and divinity. In the tradition of devout humanism that Taylor evokes, the presence of God as the ultimate point of reference is not effaced (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 227–28). Self-reliance alone is insufficient to secure the right path to God. Yet, conversely, one should acknowledge the value of personal strength and devotion. Still, the ontological grounding of faith in a theistic framework, or the Christian doctrine, are not seriously challenged. For this reason, Taylor seems to discern in these two logics not an absolute antithesis but a relation of complementarity. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume, as Taylor himself argues, that this complementary logic does not delineate two discrete and clearly distinguishable modalities or doctrines of our relation to the sacred (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 511–12). Rather, it seeks to articulate two distinct ways of relating to the sacred without unsettling the social imaginary of Christendom itself.

What matters most in Taylor's argument is not the historical evidence as such but the way he construes it in theoretical terms. Objections that focus on the historical plane miss their deeper significance, since Taylor's project is better understood as a philosophical inquiry into how historical conditions shape and condition belief (Gordon 2008, p. 656). Joas (2024) argues that the comparison between the two historical contexts, one lacking a secular option and the other characterized by the presence of such an option, is not simply chronological and is not intended as a merely descriptive comparison between two periods. Rather, Taylor's aim is to establish a deeper conceptual link between them, using this comparison to construct a narrative that strengthens and consolidates his argument (p. 150). The trajectory of Taylor's argument is not linear, and its scope continually expands and shifts as it unfolds. In sharp contrast to the historical genealogy outlined above, Taylor simultaneously discerns in the ethic of authenticity a "coming revolution," whose defining feature lies in the reaction against the stifling conformity of 1960s society (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 476). How, then, are we to address this apparent tension on Taylor's account of the ethic of authenticity and the question of its historical origins?

A deeper engagement with Taylor's argument reveals a different conceptual trajectory, one that traces the contemporary ethic of authenticity back to the Romantic period. With the transition from Christianity's internal conflicts to the Romantic revolution, the scope and orientation of Taylor's argument shift decisively. The horizon of analysis extends beyond the intra-Christian struggles over authority to the broader burden of secularity and its consequences, which now provide the backdrop against which Taylor's reflections are situated. Authority is no longer the central issue. Rather, the focus turns to the critique of the "malaises of modernity," above all the denunciation of the closed, buffered, instrumental self.

In his classic account *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling (1971) identifies Rousseau as a foundational precursor of the ethic of authenticity. Rousseau anticipates later Romantic and existentialist conceptions by affirming the primacy of the true self, moral integrity, and self-realization against the constraining authority of society (Lionel Trilling 1971, pp. 24, 93–94). Building on this lineage, Kyle Shuttleworth (2022) notes that the ethic of authenticity "is perhaps most commonly associated with existentialism" (p. 46). From Nietzsche's emphasis on self-creation as an artistic project and the creation of one's own values, through Sartre's account of authenticity as an existential project of radical choice (pp. 52, 63–64), to Heidegger's distinction between authentic (*Eigentlichkeit*) and inauthentic (*Uneigentlichkeit*) modes of Being (pp. 72–73, 78), existentialist thought consistently understands authenticity as the realization of one's own genuine possibilities. Across these accounts, as already suggested by Kierkegaard, to be authentic is to choose oneself through

personal commitment and freedom of choice, rather than to accept unreflectively what one has become (pp. 40–41).

On the other hand, insofar as existentialist accounts of authenticity may appear vulnerable to subjectivist account of authenticity, the socio-ethical approach developed by Rousseau, Herder and Hölderlin represents another important strand in the genealogy of the ideal of authenticity (Kyle Shuttleworth 2022, p. 54). This tradition is especially significant because it helps to free authenticity from the image of an isolated individual positing itself independently of social and historical conditions. In *Reflective Authenticity*, Alessandro Ferrara (1998) similarly understands authenticity as a normative concept, explicitly rejecting the ideal of the rational, disembodied autonomous subject as an abstract model of moral conduct (pp. 10–11). This move is crucial insofar as it challenges solipsistic and individualistic interpretations of authenticity grounded in the myth of a wholly self-sufficient interiority (Alessandro Ferrara 1998, pp. 50–52). On this view, authenticity consists in the capacity of the self to affirm itself as a unique and singular person, but only through engagement with a shared social and intersubjective background (Alessandro Ferrara 1998, p. 15). As Shuttleworth emphasizes, it is precisely Romantic thought that provides such an intersubjective account of authenticity, one that attends to the dynamic interaction between social contexts and individual self-determination (Kyle Shuttleworth 2022, p. 56). More broadly, the Romantic turn is of particular cultural significance, especially in figures such as Friedrich Hölderlin or Gottfried von Herder, for whom the turn to inwardness, the true and authentic self, and the affirmation of individuality are inseparable from a critique of scientific rationalism and a renewed orientation toward nature (Kyle Shuttleworth 2022, pp. 35, 48–49).

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor shows how the Romantic ideal inaugurates a new cultural sensibility—the “expressivist turn”—which establishes expressive individualism as a central cultural ideal, thereby reshaping the conditions under which meaning and selfhood are articulated (Taylor 1989, chap. 21). It signals the emergence of a new cultural constellation that privileges personal expression over the reified and disciplined instrumental agent that defines the dominant trajectory of the modern age. This analysis is already prefigured in the *Ethics of authenticity*, where Taylor traces these commitments back to the Romantic movement, particularly its turn to nature and its attempt to articulate meaning through what he calls “subtler languages,” capable of expressing resonance, moral depth, and attunement to the world (Taylor 1991, pp. 84–86). While this cultural shift is often assimilated to mere subjectivism, Taylor insists that such a reading misrepresents the normative ambitions of the expressivist ideal by reducing personal resonant visions to arbitrary preference (Taylor 1991, p. 90).

Taylor’s account of authenticity is not free-standing. Rather, he situates the ethic of authenticity within a broader critique of modernity that takes as its point of departure the loss of meaning and the loss of freedom brought about by the dominance of instrumental reason (Taylor 1991, pp. 10–11). Against this background, Taylor seeks to avoid what he identifies as the twin pathologies of modern culture: atomistic individualism and relativism. The ideal of authenticity, on his account, does not amount to a purely inward or subjectivist orientation but instead presupposes self-transcendence towards horizons of significance that are socially constituted and historically embedded (Taylor 1991, p. 15). Authenticity thus involves the realization of a potentiality that is properly one’s own, yet this process cannot be detached from the background of meanings that render such self-realization intelligible (Taylor 1991, pp. 29, 40). Authenticity demands substantive commitments, grounded in shared horizons of significance rather than arbitrary preference (Taylor 1991, pp. 37–38, 72–73). For this reason, authenticity is essentially dialogical and intersubjective.

Personal fulfillment requires relations of recognition and engagement with others, rather than the free choice of an abstract ideal (Taylor 1991, pp. 45, 48–49).

In *A Secular Age*, reaffirms explicitly this idea, by considering the close relation between expressive individualism and the ethic of authenticity.³ In this context, the decisive turning point occurs with Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, which is defined by the inward turn and champions self-expression as a counterforce to the hegemony of instrumental reason and the objectified self, a form of agency sealed off from the disclosure of meaning and from attunement to the resonant vibrations of the world (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 136, 314, 372).⁴ Significantly, Taylor not only equates the pursuit of authenticity with expressive individualism, which he traces to its historical origins in the Romantic period, but also describes it as a “generalized culture,” thereby underscoring its more recent diffusion as a cultural phenomenon across Western societies. Even more importantly, Taylor further argues that it is precisely “this turn that has plainly altered the shape of secularity 3, mainly by shifting the place of the spiritual in human life, at least as lived by many” (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 299).⁵ Taylor describes the emergence and diffusion of diverse forms and modes of individualized spiritual practice as a “cultural” and “individuating revolution” permeating North Atlantic civilization, but he argues that the elevation of individual, authentic self-expression to the status of a central societal value is not entirely novel. What is genuinely new is its broad generalization as a dominant social value, in contrast to the Romantic period, when the value of authenticity was largely confined to cultural and intellectual elites (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 473).

The ideal of self-expression emerges with Romanticism, but it is only in later modernity that it becomes a socially generalized culture that can be called the ethic of authenticity. The individuating aspect of authenticity, dating back to the Romantic movement, is of course of crucial importance. However, focusing exclusively on this aspect overlooks a central feature of Taylor’s narrative, which is not merely one of decline but of a radical reconfiguration of how the spiritual is situated in relation to individual and social life (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 437). The dynamic of pluralization—what Taylor terms the “nova effect”—is precisely what propels individuals in our secular age toward the continual creation and exploration of new spiritual possibilities, thereby decisively shaping the character of our time (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 299–300). In this respect, I agree with José Casanova’s reading of Taylor, according to which the age of authenticity, emerging around the 1960s, marks a pivotal moment in the trajectory of radical secularization in modern Western societies (Casanova 2010, p. 272). Similarly, Gregor McLennan locates the emergence of the ethic of authenticity in the 1960s and emphasizes the historical convergence between the age of authenticity and the boundless proliferation of spiritual options. In particular, he highlights the dimension of fragilization, the subject of the next section of this paper, which destabilizes our sense of the spiritual (McLennan 2010, p. 630).

It is true that Taylor himself places particular emphasis on tracing the historical origins of the ethic of authenticity back to the individualistic expressivism of the Romantic movement. Paolo Costa (2022) argues that the ethic of authenticity “has its direct antecedent in romantic expressivism” (p. 43). However, the diffusion of the ethic of authenticity in post-Durkheimian societies is not merely a historical extension of expressive individualism into the present. Rather, it is a revolutionary transformation that opens up possibilities for new forms of spiritual life. Taylor’s argument suggests that the radical novelty of the ethic of authenticity belongs to the present era, above all through its relation to the processes of desocialization and radical diffusion that shape our relation to the spiritual. Christian faith now exists alongside a wide array of other spiritual options. More specifically, Taylor argues that the infinite pluralization of new spiritual options destabilizes our sense of the spiritual by casting “dwelling” and “seeking” as two opposing poles, each representing

a distinct way of relating to the spiritual through either “peremptory authority” either “utter self-suspicion or total self-trust” (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 512). The core argument here is that the debate is too often reduced to the distinction between spiritualities of quest and peremptory authority, between the two extremes of self-sufficient autonomy and unconditional submission to external authority, thereby polarizing the debate and reducing these limiting positions to the only conceivable options (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 518).

Taylor’s aim is to show that the boundless proliferation of novel spiritual options generates a space of unsettled searching and open-ended exploration, within which the two salient alternatives are configured as rigid, antithetical poles structuring the contemporary spiritual field. What Taylor clearly envisions here is the religious and spiritual patchwork evident in new age spirituality movements and trends, which frequently provide a shallow and materialistic understanding of spirituality within our consumer-driven society (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 512–13). Critics often dismiss the new forms of individual spiritual seeking as trivial, privatized, or self-absorbed. However, Taylor cautions against conflating all authenticity-oriented spirituality with its more superficial and shallow manifestations in contemporary society (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 512). This perspective presents an oversimplified and distorted account of current developments in secular modernity. Framing “dwelling” and “seeking” as absolute and mutually exclusive categories mistakenly turns them into an ontological divide, overlooking the depth and diversity of the contemporary spiritual landscape that unfolds between them. Such a distinction tends to obscure the “middle space,” where we can perceive the ongoing process of development, recomposition, and creative reappropriation of the past of the spiritual resources within secular modernity.

Thus, I believe in contrast to Abbey that, when Taylor compares our epoch with the era of the Reformation, what he has in mind is not authenticity per se but the idea that our epoch is best understood as an age of transition, an open-ended moment in which the outcome is not pre-determined (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 535). The transformation Taylor describes is neither a straightforward progression nor, conversely, a nostalgic, let alone reactionary, regression measured against the standards of the past (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 745). Every epoch has its standard or conventional religious forms, along with various forms of deviation that emerge from different displacements or amalgamations that contradict the norm. With every change, new problems and novel challenges emerge, and every position is accompanied by diversified claims and unexpected deviations. In this respect, Taylor renounces any attempt to objectify the practical ambitions and the consequences of any position, since they all involve implicit and differentiated claims, various deviations, or unintended consequences. Just as it is unacceptable to reduce the emerging spiritual landscape to a shallow, superficial, and unprincipled spirituality, it is likewise untenable to propose as a remedy the uncritical restoration of a bygone past, one frequently characterized by rigid conformity, the subordination of faith to power, or submission to hollow authority (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 512–13; 2002, pp. 113–14).

This argument, however, suggests that certain forms of individualistic spirituality possess greater significance than others. If this is the case, a pertinent question arises: should we conclude that there is something like an internal split or differentiation within the culture of authenticity itself? Is every individualistic conception of spirituality considered *ipso facto* as lacking in depth and scope or are there some forms of personal spiritual quest that are more authentic than others?

If this is true, then we cannot definitively determine whether individualism is inherently a negative aspect of our secular age, or if its value depends on the quality and depth of each specific quest in question. Indeed, several strands of Taylor’s analysis point to that direction. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor already introduces an internal distinction to the ethic of authenticity, arguing that the ideal of authenticity is characterized by “a

continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms" (Taylor 1991, p. 94). He reiterates this point in a more recent interview, arguing that authenticity is not unidirectional but rather a double-edged phenomenon. While it may foster superficial spiritual expressions devoid of depth and breadth, it can also facilitate a serious engagement with historical and cultural traditions. The dissolution of collective commitments to religion is not the inevitable outcome of our secular age. The new post-Durkheimian framework emphasizes personal spiritual experience but does not preclude strong collective commitments. Even within the post-Durkheimian predicament, the possibility of collective articulations of religion continues to be both conceivable and meaningful (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 516–17). Thus, Taylor appears to recognize that within the culture of authenticity, it is possible to distinguish between transient, self-referential forms that lack depth and approaches that creatively engage with and reinterpret the past. Ultimately, this orientation emerges from our democratic sensibilities, which require an ongoing reworking of the past to discover new ways of responding to novel challenges and emerging circumstances (Taylor and Kuipers 2008).

Reflecting on Taylor's analysis of religion and modernity, Robert Bellah (2010) observes that Taylor articulates a critical account of modernity, one that calls for a generous engagement with contemporary cultural and spiritual developments, while recognizing the enduring richness and vitality of past religious traditions (pp. 51–53). In the same way, Ronald Kuipers (2016) argues that Taylor's analysis entails the normative claim that religious communities should adopt, regardless of their authority and social power, a more reflexive attitude of openness by resisting structural closure at their boundaries in the face of religious pluralism and the proliferation of diverse religious and spiritual attitudes (pp. 50–51). Although these arguments do justice to Taylor's insights, they remain, in my view, still somewhat one-sided. Focusing on how sociologically and culturally widespread the ethic of authenticity is in post-Durkheimian societies may itself be misleading. Let me clarify this further. A central argument in *A Secular Age* is one that reclaims the enduring significance of religious motivation (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 452, 530, 819, n. 35). As I will try to show, this argument takes many forms in Taylor's analysis and is not always free from ambivalence, culminating in an attempt to relocate the prospect of transcendence within the open space defined by the ethic of authenticity.

I now believe that it is this position, rather than the novelty or not of authenticity as Abbey suggests or the internal sociological and cultural configurations of authenticity, that is inherently problematic in Taylor's argument. In Section 5 of this paper, I will argue that the principal difficulty in Taylor's analysis resides not in determining the precise sociological conditions of authenticity, cross-pressure, and fragilization but in the tension between the sociological and the ontological aspects of his argument.

This is because, in Taylor's own terms, religion is characterized by an aspiration toward a transformative perspective that transcends mere inner-worldly human concerns. Fullness is not reducible to private experience or emotional depth. It involves a transformative aspiration that draws the self toward a horizon beyond mere human flourishing (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 5, 26, 530, 600–1). Taylor insists throughout his analysis in *A Secular Age* that in secular modernity the emergence of thick conceptions of fullness based on religion is not anymore a viable possibility, whether these conceptions can be disclosed either as individual or as collective ones (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 15). The way Taylor presents the historical development of religion as a process of gradual disembedding from its social contexts—from the pre-Axial period to the Axial age and then to post-Axial religion—effectively illustrates this point (Thomas 2016, pp. 54–55).⁶ The unstable post-Axial equilibrium gradually, and decisively, shifts in favor of the individuating dimensions of the new moral predicament that Taylor calls the "modern moral order" (religion of

devotion/rational virtue). In phenomenological terms, this trajectory reflects a progressive subjectification of religion, which increasingly outweighs its collective and ritualistic aspects, leading to an ontological thinning of moral experience and to a loss of access to the transcendent dimension of fullness (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 146, 157–58, 613).

Expressive individualism marks a novel breaking point insofar as it tries to rehabilitate meaning without the ontological background of Christendom. Romanticism is closely aligned with what Taylor terms “the aspiration to wholeness,” by which he means the existential sense of a meaningful and integrate life that surpasses, in depth and scope, the constraints and the fragmentary character of the ordinary (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 5, 380, 507–8, 609–10, 613, 640, 676). It emerges as a reaction against the emergence of the rational and self-sufficient subject, whose disengaged stance objectifies reality and thereby suppresses human vitality, creativity, and openness to a plurality of sources of meaning.

The crucial point of this analysis, however, is that expressive individualism marks a genuinely novel rupture, insofar as it seeks to recover meaning without recourse to the ontological horizon sustained by Christendom. Taylor refers to the “subtler languages” of Romanticism, which are striving to articulate through art, poetry, and literature a deeper moral meaning and to evoke resonances of the world that exceed the instrumentalized stance of contemporary secularity. Such experiences, however, are no longer necessarily tied to a theistic orientation or to religious belief (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 356, 359, 372, 391).⁷ From another perspective, the language of Romanticism can be understood as involving a suspension, or even an indeterminacy, of ontological commitments (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 757). This claim amounts to the assertion that our secular world is no longer structurally bound to the social, cultural, and symbolic mediation of the sacred nor structurally dependent on the omnipresence of the divine (Jager 2015, pp. 221–22).

Beyond the purely historical background of Taylor’s considerations regarding the ethic of authenticity, this argument bears significant implications for its conceptual articulation. Our secular age is not simply an age of declining faith. Rather, it marks a transition from what Taylor calls the “Age of Mobilization” to the “Age of Authenticity” (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 480, 503, 514). By this, Taylor refers to a shift from the dominance of collective religious frameworks toward a more diverse field of possibilities characterized by individual, communal, or hybrid forms of belief and practice that may remain congruent with (Christian) faith. For this reason, Taylor urges us to rethink the diffusion of various religious and spiritual options by moving beyond the rigid polarization between individualistic spiritual seeking and collective religious adherence. To clarify how this configuration takes place, I now turn to the question of fragilization (and cross-pressure), before returning to the ethic of authenticity in order to show how Taylor’s narrative unfolds.

4. Secular Humanism, Fragilization, and Cross-Pressure

Authors Taylor identifies the phenomenon of fragilization as one of the key features that distinguish our secular world from that of 500 years ago (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 303–4). Fragilization is conceptually correlated with the pluralization of religious and spiritual options that define the secular age, a process that Taylor terms, as noted above, the “nova effect.” Taylor argues that we live in a world where belief has become an option among others and is experienced accordingly in secular modernity, where the possibility to create a spiritual option multiplies *ad infinitum*. The existence of an alternative makes each context more fragile, since it unsettles what is considered thinkable or unthinkable beyond any conceivable binary distinction or opposition (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 556). There is no single stance that is privileged as the authoritative one. Each remains contestable, and neutrality also means that individuals are not compelled toward any particular stance, since every option appears as plausible and credible as any other. But what matters most in

secular modernity is not the simultaneous presence of religious or spiritual alternatives as such—something also common in many pre-modern social and historical contexts—but the sense of cross-pressure that emerges as a defining global experience of secular modernity. Taylor describes this as “a titanic change” within Western civilization, because the experience of cross-pressure and the questioning of every option is now felt by everyone. It resembles a movement between our situated, “engaged” involvement in the world and a “disengaged,” reflective standpoint that demonstrates our coexistence with other, equally legitimate perspectives (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 12).

From this point of view, fragilization and cross-pressure are depicted as objective phenomena that permeate culture as a whole. At other points, however, Taylor appears to adopt a more nuanced approach, linking fragilization to the subject’s own lived experience. For example, Taylor asserts in a key passage that fragilization is in fact an objective and widespread phenomenon that permeates culture as a whole, influencing all religious positions and encompassing both belief and unbelief. Yet, in sharp contrast, he also emphasizes, further complicating matters, that the experience of cross-pressure affects certain individuals and social contexts more intensely than others, even though it spans the entire spectrum from committed belief to outright unbelief (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 595). Fragilization can become more intense depending on a person’s subjective experience, particularly when individuals are not firmly rooted in any one context and instead feel puzzled, pulled in different directions, or have constructed a kind of middle-ground position through bricolage (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 556). It appears, then, that cross-pressure is experienced by many, though not universally, and that it pertains less to firmly held positions of belief or unbelief than to those occupying more intermediate stances or uncertain positions.

This understated ambivalence in Taylor’s analysis has led commentators to question his position or to interpret it in a way that focuses primarily on its subjective and psychological dimensions. Ruth Abbey pays close attention to the precise conceptual relationship between pluralism and fragilization, arguing that such an interpretation challenges the supposed dominance of fragilization and requires that we take seriously the psychological and intentional aspects of the subject (Abbey 2014, p. 110). Similarly, Maeve Cooke understands the fragilization of belief as inseparable from uncertainty about the correctness of one’s own convictions concerning the ultimate issues of human life (Cooke 2021, pp. 742–43). On this basis, Joas (2024) offers a suggestive comparison between Charles Taylor’s and Peter Bergers’ approaches on religious pluralism and its socio-psychological consequences (pp. 147–48). Against Berger’s theoretical development and defense of the “intensity-reducing effect of cultural pluralism,” Joas argues that the mere presence of religious alternatives does not necessarily entail a weakening of one’s own religious commitment. He maintains that, from an empirical point of view, exposure to diverse religious options, and more broadly to axiological and cultural pluralism, may indeed increase interest in religious knowledge but does not lead to a reduction in the intensity of faith commitment (Joas 2024, p. 148). The underlying assumption of this claim is that religious commitment cannot be adequately explained as the outcome of rational argument alone, whether discursive or utilitarian in nature.

What is nonetheless noteworthy, given the foregoing discussion, is that Abbey and Joas arrive at broadly similar conclusions despite proceeding from entirely different premises. According to Abbey, Taylor’s overall argument tacitly links the experience of fragilization to the diverse psychological experiences of individuals and renders it contingent upon the sociological context of one’s own milieu or social location. From this perspective, fragilization and cross-pressure do not constitute genuinely universal experiences within secular culture. This ambiguity, Abbey argues, makes it difficult to assess the explanatory

value of fragilization. Taylor's analysis can be adequate only insofar as it remains focused on the phenomenon of pluralization, without extending fragilization and cross-pressure to secular culture as a whole (Abbey 2014, pp. 108–9, 112). Abbey further extends this critique to the claim that exclusive humanism is not inherently linked to fragilization. More specifically, she argues that exclusive humanism does not fully permeate the entire range of available options and therefore does not shape subjective experience in a uniform way. Consequently, cross-pressure and fragilization, as well as the ethic of authenticity, do not fundamentally depend on the presence of exclusive humanism, which plays only a minimal role in producing either authenticity or fragilization. Belief, on this account, is not fragilized solely because exclusive humanism exists (Abbey 2014, pp. 104–5, 107, 112). For his part, Joas (2024) contends that fragilization remains an empirically useful concept insofar as it captures processes of increasing individualization and the close relationship between religious pluralization and religious or secular conversion, which is facilitated by the immediate presence of alternative options (pp. 148–49). At the same time, he argues that Taylor's account of individualization and the "nova effect" rests on a form of "cultural determinism" that seeks to explain the reformist tendencies of medieval Christianity (p. 156). The thrust of this argument is that Taylor overextends the "post-Durkheimian phenomenon," thereby exaggerating both its quantitative significance as for the radical individualization of religion and its representativeness with respect to the nature of religious commitment in a secular age (Joas 2024, pp. 154–55). Ultimately, Joas suggests, Taylor fails to provide clear criteria for distinguishing appropriate forms of expressive individualism or genuine forms of religious commitment. What Taylor's analysis therefore requires is a more robust sociological grounding and stronger historical-empirical evidence concerning the diverse and multifaceted configurations of religious life in the contemporary world.

However, I believe both arguments fail to account for the distinct levels at which Taylor's argument is constructed and unfolds in its complexity. First, it is imperative to note that Durkheimian typology serve as an analytical framework for theoretical comprehension and sociological observation, utilized to explore the social and cultural transformations affecting the societal functions of religion. In *Varieties of Religion Today*, Taylor describes our age as one in which neo-Durkheimian identities find themselves in a "quasi-agonistic" relationship with an emerging post-Durkheimian dispensation (Taylor 2002, p. 114). Similarly, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor emphasizes that his claim "is not that our present day is unambiguously post-Durkheimian", since "there is a struggle going on between these two dispensations" (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 488). Taylor does not portray the post-Durkheimian condition as fully overwhelming or dominant in the present era. Rather, he characterizes our situation as a "battle between neo- and post-Durkheimian construals," as an ongoing transition into a post-Durkheimian age in which previously robust connections between individuals and their collective forms of association and belonging are increasingly strained, though not yet entirely broken (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 510) (see also Section 2 of this paper). As I will argue, this understanding of our present situation has significant implications for Taylor's account of authenticity.

Exclusive humanism, on the other hand, articulates the reconfiguration of the ontological horizon through which the secular world is disclosed.⁸ It is not a neutral standpoint available for individuals to adopt through deliberate, intentional decisions. Exclusive humanism may not operate as a direct moral motivation, but it nevertheless provides the wider cultural background—what Taylor calls the "social imaginary"⁹—that makes fragilization possible. Its significance lies not in directly motivating individuals but in reshaping the very conditions under which belief is possible. Exclusive humanism consolidates the fundamental idea that a meaningful life can be fully grounded in human capacities alone at the expense of participating in a higher spiritual reality (Charles Taylor

2010a, pp. 164, 256, 447). This horizon constitutes the “immanent frame,” which occludes the very possibility of acknowledging a transcendent or higher spiritual reality (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 555). The modern moral order inherits from the Reform the impetus toward order and homogenization, which becomes a basic component of exclusive humanism. It is understood as a constructive ideal of an impersonal social order conceived as the extension of purely human capacities (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 88, 288–290, 771–72). In earlier periods, the distance between religious positions was maintained by thick boundaries, such as distinct confessional communities or limited intermarriage. Today, by contrast, social stability across generations has increasingly eroded, since people live and move across previously insurmountable boundaries. Furthermore, the inward turn of modernity and the creation of a disciplined, buffered self provide the epistemological and psychological basis for modern identity as a key component of exclusive humanism.

This is why, in my view, there exists an intrinsic and undeniable relationship between fragilization and the fundamental values of the modern moral order, which remains a key component of exclusive humanism. For it is precisely the interplay between homogeneity and instability, understood as a continual process and a distinctive characteristic of modern society, that acts as a catalyst, amplifying the fragilizing effects of pluralism through an ever-expanding array of new positions, possibilities, and beliefs (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 303–4). Exclusive humanism is not a static reality but a significant source of dynamism, generating destabilization, conflict, cross-pressures, and transformation. This change, however, is neither linear nor progressive. Rather, it is revolutionary in character, marked by the affirmation of self-improvement and forms of horizontal transcendence (Paolo Costa 2022, p. 44). One might argue that fragilization constitutes the phenomenological effect of a deeper fragmentation of the spiritual that takes place on the ontological level. Fragmentation is not a new concern in Taylor’s work. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, his critique of fragmentation is developed primarily in socio-political terms, where it is understood as the rise of atomism through the weakening of communal bonds, the erosion of social solidarity, and the decline of shared forms of democratic action (Taylor 1991, pp. 111–13, 117–18). By contrast, in *A Secular Age* and in his later writings on religion, fragmentation also acquires an ontological dimension, insofar as it concerns our relation to religious faith and to spiritual life more generally.

Fragmentation is not an easy concept to define or assess. Taylor uses it to describe the process by which our relation to the spiritual becomes detached from collective forms of belonging. Although the concept is of central importance for understanding Taylor’s overall narrative, it appears only sporadically in *A Secular Age*. In the passage discussed in Section 2 of this paper, Taylor seems to understand fragmentation primarily in sociological terms, namely as the detachment of religion, and more broadly spirituality from, from its social contexts and collective matrices. A closer examination, however, allows for a more expansive interpretation. In my view, fragmentation in Taylor’s work is not only horizontal but also vertical. It does not refer merely to the loss of the shared contexts of religion and the rise of atomism but also to a loss of depth. In this sense, fragmentation concerns not only the social or political role of religion but also the moral, existential, and ontological dimensions of what Taylor calls “a sense of the whole” (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 381). It thus affects not only the sociological conditions of spirituality but also its ontological matrices, which are increasingly closed off within the immanent frame under the dominance of instrumental reason and the impersonal order (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 378). This is why I have suggested above that fragmentation should be understood as the ontological counterpart to fragilization at the phenomenological level.

A further issue concerns both the historical origins of fragmentation and the scope of the process itself. In *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger shows how secularization, plu-

ralization, and the individualization of religion, which he terms “subjectivization”, are structurally intertwined (Berger 1967). In *Modernity, Pluralism, and the Crisis of Meaning*, Berger and Luckmann (1995) indirectly mobilize the notion of fragmentation by describing the “coexistence of different values systems and fragments of values systems in the same society”, a condition they associate with value relativism and a resulting crisis of meaning (pp. 27, 37–38, 42–43, 55–56). Similarly, in her influential account in “Believing without Belonging,” Grace Davie (1990) argues that religious faith undergoes a significant transformation rather than a simple decline. Faith does not disappear but shifts toward institutional detachment and, in many cases, toward more experiential and individualized forms. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) likewise identify a “subjective turn” in contemporary culture, marked by the emergence of subjective forms of spirituality and processes of self-sacralization. Importantly, this does not entail the replacement of “religion” from “spirituality” but rather a reconfiguration of the cultural landscape through the simultaneous coexistence of secularization and sacralization process (pp. 9–10).

With respect to the historical origins of fragmentation, van der Tol and Gorski (2022) offer a particularly illuminating account by interpreting secularization itself as a process of fragmentation. They understand fragmentation both in terms of symbolic and cultural differentiation and as a fragmentation of the meanings of the sacred within public space. On this view, secularization unfolds through a dialectical process of de-sacralization and re-sacralization of public symbols, spaces, and collective meanings (p. 496). Fragmentation thus emerges as a long-term vector of secularization, stretching from the internal tensions of medieval Christianity through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the rise of modern nation-building and nationalist ideologies, and the formation of political identities, to contemporary forms of bodily and self-sacralization, religious pluralism, the search for authenticity, and even the recent re-sacralization of politics and the resurgence of nationalist movements (van der Tol and Gorski 2022, pp. 500–1, 505–7, 508).

Like authenticity, Taylor ultimately situates fragmentation within the emergence of the modern moral and political order, shaped by the dominance of utilitarian rationality, formal universalism, and the long “work of Reform” that begins in the late Middle Ages, intensifies with the Reformation, and continues through early modern social formations and state-building. By contrast, Joas (2024) criticizes this reform narrative as overly determinist and culturalist, arguing that it cannot function as a single explanatory engine leading toward a unified outcome (p. 153). Nevertheless, as with authenticity, the full force of fragmentation becomes visible only under contemporary social and cultural conditions. It is in our present epoch that fragmentation reveals its depth and can be grasped in its most acute form. At the same time, Taylor seeks to move beyond a merely diagnostic account of fragmentation and fragilization as inevitable features of the secular age. This ambition explains his sustained attention to the ethic of authenticity as a possible site, both sociologically and symbolically, for the revitalization of value and meaning. In this sense, the turn to authenticity is motivated not only by historical and sociological considerations but also by conceptual ones. For this reason, Taylor criticizes both Davie and Heelas, the former for overstating the sociological reach of her diagnosis and the latter for drawing too sharp a distinction between collective or “objective” religion and “subjective spirituality” (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 509–10, 514, 520–22). He argues that his position, by contrast, offers a more nuanced account of the complex and evolving relationship between religion and spirituality. Yet it is precisely here that a further tension emerges. While the opposition between individual and collective forms of belonging is indeed crucial for Taylor’s understanding of authenticity, I will argue that this is not the only tension shaping his analysis. Other tensions also operate within his framework, and it is these that ultimately generate significant difficulties for his account of authenticity.

Against this background, the framework of exclusive humanism becomes crucial for understanding not only authenticity and fragilization taken separately but also their deep and undeniable interconnectedness. From my perspective, Taylor's analysis implies that the rejection of authority and pre-established rules, together with the increasingly immediate and accessible presence of multiple alternatives, is a necessary precondition but not in itself the cause for the emergence and expansion of the ethic of authenticity. Rather, the ethic of authenticity emerges largely as a reaction against the objectified and disciplined modern identity, for which instrumental rationality is a central component (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 476). Thus, my interpretation is that fragilization and cross-pressure do not primarily refer to the mere existence of a plurality of options but rather to the process in which religion and spirituality become detached from their social contexts.

The sociological fact that increasing number of people occupy divergent spiritual positions is undoubtedly an important aspect of the experience of fragilization. Taylor acknowledges that the world of an individual who remains steadfast in faith differs from that of someone who feels the pressure of alternative possibilities (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 556–67, 598). Nonetheless, the vocabulary of fragilization and cross-pressure is not intended to articulate the totality of an individual's subjective world, nor merely to frame the phenomenological experience of the instability that one position introduces for another. The phenomenon of fragilization runs at a much deeper level than this. It is not primarily psychological but relational and structural. It reflects the disconnection of spiritual frameworks from social anchoring. It is the cultural consequence of living in a world where no belief system can claim ontological primacy. In our secular age, this experience is, inevitably, shared by everyone regardless of the tenacity or intensity of their beliefs or spiritual commitments.

In this regard, I follow Colin Jager's account of spiritual wandering—the exploration of diverse spiritual options without firm ontological commitments—as “the central phenomenological experience of the secular age” (Jager 2016, p. 218). Such an interpretation helps to illuminate why Taylor at times describes fragilization as “mutual,” underscoring the way our commitments are marked by a lack of ontological depth and substantive existential resonance. The emphasis lies not so much in the capacity to move among a plurality of options as in the lack of deep ontological grounding in any of them. Fragilization is not merely the subjective unease caused by multiple options. The phenomenon of “cross-pressure” does not presuppose that everyone feels destabilized. Rather, it indicates that no position, however firm, can claim ontological closure in a pluralistic world. Every worldview is potentially unsettled by the presence of alternatives, not because of the alternatives themselves, but because of the loss of transcendent grounding that once stabilized belief.

The main problem with Taylor's account of fragilization and authenticity, in my view, is that he does not consistently remain at the sociological level of analysis. Instead, he frames his argument through a rigid polarization between immanence and transcendence, a move that obscures the instability and fluidity characteristic of the post-Durkheimian dispensation. While commentators such as Abbey or Joas focus on particular aspects of Taylor's argument, namely the tensions internal to exclusive humanism or to the post-Durkheimian framework, I argue that the deeper difficulty in Taylor's analysis emerges from the unresolved tension produced by the combination of these two dimensions.

Taylor provides a two-tiered account of the central structural tension of secular modernity. Every position, especially the extremes, may encounter the influence of opposing solicitations at some point in their lifetime (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 437). Fragilization is an objective condition of secularity, which then generates varied subjective responses. It is a condition of persistent and irreducible instability, marked by the absence of a viable and enduring movement capable of providing a meaningful and lasting resolution

(Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 302). Similarly, the experience of cross-pressure pertains to the shared experience of this perspective. It is an objective feature of our cultural field, not reducible to the contingent psychology of individuals, and it does not imply that every individual feels genuinely disturbed or destabilized. Instead, it refers to a fundamental tension between the impersonal order, within which too much has been lost, and orthodox Christianity. However, this framework presupposes a polarization between opposing extremes, as noted earlier. Taylor seeks to articulate fragilization and cross-pressure through a polarized distinction, and he is able to affirm that, although the experience of cross-pressure is not universally experienced, its availability as a structural possibility is decisive for understanding secular modernity (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 378).

In other words, it is precisely through the polarization of extreme positions into opposing ideal types that Taylor is able to frame fragilization and cross-pressure as objective features of the secular age. In “When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age,” Jonathan Sheehan (2010) argues, by drawing on the category of “conjectural history,” that Taylor construes a narrative, loosely grounded in empirical evidence, that is ultimately shaped to support his own normative claims, almost venturing into a form of “apologetics” reclaiming the continuous, albeit necessarily transformed, tenets of (Christian) religion into the present (pp. 224–26). While much could be said about Sheehan’s approach,¹⁰ I agree with his argument that Taylor pursues a strategy of inflating extreme positions into ideal types, thereby rendering them indeterminate points of reference against which a series of concepts and normative claims can be developed. This strategy allows Taylor to move seamlessly between historical-descriptive considerations and prescriptive-normative claims (Jonathan Sheehan 2010, pp. 239–40). I believe this sufficiently explains the recurrent oscillation in Taylor’s argument between social-historical description and normative commitment, between a descriptive apprehension of religion’s trajectory in post-Durkheimian society—illustrated, for example, by the distinction between collective commitment and individual seeking (“seeking” and “dwelling”)—and a prescriptive framework aimed at rehabilitating transcendence under the conditions of secular modernity, exemplified by the contrast between immanence and transcendence.

Taylor’s account necessarily relies on methodological abstraction and ideal-typical constructions, and it is therefore not intended to provide a full description of the concrete lived experience of individuals (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 556–57). We cannot readily imagine what our culture would be like without the broader world-structure shaped by the tension between extreme positions, such as orthodox religion and materialist atheism, faith and exclusive humanism, or transcendence and immanence. These extremes define culturally and symbolically the range of available possibilities and positions, since the middle positions define themselves through what they ultimately reject (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 598, 676). The problem is not so much the conceptual exaggeration of post-Durkheimian dispensation or the undeniable importance of exclusive humanism for the overall framework of Taylor’s view. The deeper problem concerns how Taylor seeks to articulate the ethic of authenticity, namely by reproducing the polarity between the extreme positions of immanence and transcendence within the conceptual space opened up by the ethic of authenticity. In pursuing this line of argument, I do not aim to defend Taylor’s analysis. Rather, I seek to show that his account of authenticity may be even more ambivalent than commentators such as Abbey or Joas suggest.

5. Reclaiming Transcendence in the Age of Authenticity

Taylor understands the quest for authenticity more as a reappropriation and reevaluation of tradition than an attempt to escape or radically alter it. However, Taylor must demonstrate how this is possible in a society finding itself in a constant state of transforma-

tion and recomposition of its spiritual resources. For example, Taylor refers emphatically to specific cases, such as the “ecumenical community” of Taizé, the pilgrimage to Medjugorje, or the World Youth Day. It is therefore unsurprising that Taizé served as a model for the development of World Youth Day, which constitutes, according to Taylor, a form of Christian gathering adapted to the sensibilities of the Age of Authenticity (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 517). The Taizé community appears to exemplify a model of believers who challenge rigid rules and unquestioned authority without collapsing religious commitment into the superficial practices of contemporary individualistic spiritual quests. A first tension, then, emerges that centers on the asymmetry between individualism and collective commitments. Although Taylor appeals to the ethic of authenticity, he nevertheless shows a clear preference for collective modes of religious engagement rather than purely individual spiritual seeking.

The second tension that emerges concerns the distinction between immanence and transcendence, which Taylor seeks to rehabilitate and affirm as a still viable possibility within the conditions of secular modernity. As Taylor’s argument unfolds, the focus once again shifts from historical analysis to conceptual reflection. In his critical discussion of Paul Heelas’s work, Taylor argues that we should distinguish the self-referential nature of authenticity from the existential orientation toward life’s ultimate questions. He challenges Heelas’s claim that prioritizing self-expression and the pursuit of one’s own spiritual path necessarily precludes the possibility of orienting one’s life toward a reality beyond this world (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 509). From this point of view, the criterion for determining the fate of religion in a secular age is not whether there is an actual possibility of adhering to an individual or collective aspect of religion but rather whether we can successfully relate anymore to the experience of transcendence and the transformative implications this experience entails.

In this regard, Taylor’s argument appears to shift almost imperceptibly from the historical examination of the social matrices of religious adherence, understood through the dual lens of individual quest and collective engagement, to a normative account of the implications of authenticity in its possible relation to transcendence within the contemporary spiritual landscape. What appears as a sociological conflict conceals the deeper ontological horizon structured by two extreme positions understood as antithetical poles. By engaging in the question of authenticity, Taylor seeks not only to rethink the sociological conditions of religious adherence within secular societies but also to rehabilitate transcendence as a meaningful symbolic resource. Ultimately, Taylor maintains that while contemporary authenticity may foster shallow, self-indulgent forms, it also enables genuine spiritual quests that can reach beyond immanence toward transcendence (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 509). While Taylor argues, as I have already suggested, that the true substance of the ethic of authenticity is to be found between the extremes of “dwelling” and “seeking,” he nonetheless almost imperceptibly reframes his argument as a rigid distinction between immanent and transcendent spiritual orientations. Taizé, in particular, exemplifies a universal community of solidarity, in which participants move beyond self-indulgent pursuits of well-being and superficial self-fulfillment toward deeper moral or transcendent commitments, even as they remain cautious of moralism and institutional authority (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 509; Taylor and Kuipers 2008).

This is the point at which Taylor’s argument becomes most problematic, as it moves back and forth between a sociological account of the reappropriation of religious past and the normative question of how transcendence might be situated within the culture of authenticity. The distinction between these two methodological dimensions—the sociological and the ontological—is not always sharply drawn, even the fact that their function within Taylor theoretical universe is different. The pilgrimage site of Medjugorje, for instance, is portrayed as

a form of mass religious mobilization understood less as a novel creation shaped by the ethic of authenticity and more as a continuation of the past through the enduring lens of Catholic heritage. Here again, the collective-mobilization dimension of Taylor's analysis becomes dominant, in a manner that overtly challenges secular modernity. Yet the problem runs even deeper. Taylor does not only argue that the pilgrimage to Medjugorje represents a collective religious experience but also that it can clearly be traced back to an underlying proto-religious continuity. As Taylor emphatically notes, this form of collective religious experience predates the Axial Age and openly resists the processes of subjectification and disenchantment set in motion—at least in part—by Reform and further advanced through the development of secular modernity (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 469, 517).

Therefore, it becomes evident that the issue is not merely that Taylor strongly emphasizes continuity. What is particularly striking is that the collective dimension of religion now operates alongside an orientation that clearly transcends ordinary life, to the point that these two dimensions become indistinguishable in Taylor's argument. This blurring becomes even more apparent when Taylor appeals, alongside Medjugorje, to other sacred sites or pilgrimages such as Lourdes, Fátima, Częstochowa, and Guadalupe, which embody a collective experience intertwined with a sense of transcending worldly life, signaling continuity with older forms of religious experience within the otherwise culturally and symbolically discontinuous universe of secular modernity (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 546). Aside from the fact that all these examples are drawn from the Catholic tradition, they represent a collective religious experience that, in my view, is largely unrelated to the ethic of authenticity and instead reflects the continued presence and ongoing influence of Christian-Catholic heritage in modernity.

However, and more problematically, another tension suddenly reappears in Taylor's argument when these experiences are described as "putatively transcendent" (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 517–18). Commenting on this particular aspect of Taylor's position, Jeffrey Alexander makes a point that aligns closely with what I have already sought to establish in my own argument. While Taylor seeks to restore transcendence within the ethic of authenticity as a response to the "malaise of modernity" or "immanence," he ultimately hesitates. He remains skeptical of new forms of spirituality, including those tied to collective religious mobilization, and doubts whether they can truly serve as a locus of higher meaning that transcends ordinary life (Alexander 2021). Ultimately, it appears that "expressive individualism" appears incapable of grounding a genuine relationship to a substantive meaning—or what Taylor calls "fulness"—that transcends the merely spurious and non-genuine—or even illusory—forms of aspired transcendence within ordinary life.

Taylor's criticism of Martha Nussbaum's concept of "internal transcendence" is, I suggest, indicative of this point. In her essay "Transcending Humanity," Nussbaum (1990) develops an account of transcendence that she characterizes as "internal" (p. 379). On this view, transcendence consists in surpassing our humanity according to properly human—or, in Taylor's terms, immanent—standards, such as esthetic creativity, erotic fulfillment, the striving for excellence, or morally virtuous acting. While Taylor finds this account both interesting and serious, he ultimately regards it as insufficient, insofar as it forecloses any conception of supernatural transcendence or metaphysical fullness (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 627, 629–30, 656).

My point in criticizing Taylor is not that he necessarily or unequivocally privileges continuity over discontinuity. I do not believe this is the case. Rather, the ambiguities and tensions in his analysis arise from his attempt to locate transcendence within the novel spiritual universe constituted by the ethic of authenticity. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor already makes the strong claim that a genuine form of authenticity, one that remains attuned to our *sentiment de l'existence*, can be realized only achieved through integration to

a “wider whole” (Taylor 1991, p. 91). It is, however, open to question why such a “wider whole” must be understood exclusively in non-anthropocentric terms in order to function as a genuine source of value for authenticity (Varga 2012, p. 32). Fred Dallmayr (2012) further argues that the ethic of authenticity articulated in Taylor’s earlier work bears little continuity with his later analysis in *A Secular Age*. While Taylor there appears open and receptive to the new forms of religiosity, authenticity, Dallmayr suggests, becomes now little more than a euphemism for “modern buffering and self-sufficiency” (Fred Dallmayr 2012, pp. 194, 202). By contrast, Maeve Cooke maintains that the question of whether genuine transcendence remains possible within the closed conditions of the immanent frame remains open in Taylor’s analysis (Cooke 2021, pp. 746, 748).

In my view, it is not only that Taylor gives a clear predilection to religion and transcendence without really arguing but that his account of authenticity is rather ambivalent. José Casanova argues the expansion of an invisible, radically privatized, and fragmented universe of spiritual experimentation—marked by endless spiritual transitions, religious conversions, cross-pressures, and, ultimately, highly individualistic paths of spiritual seeking—may well be internally dynamic from a sociological point of view. Nevertheless, he maintains that the ethic of authenticity remains limited in its higher existential or theological aspirations, particularly in its capacity to challenge the dominant position of exclusive humanism or to genuinely unsettle the cultural and symbolic horizon of the immanent frame (Casanova 2010, pp. 279–80). Thus, the challenge is not authenticity per se but the closure to transcendence, which undermines the very possibility of fullness in its deep, transformative sense.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have engaged with Taylor’s account of authenticity, fragilization, and cross-pressure. From my perspective, the central issue is not whether authenticity existed prior to modernity but whether it can meaningfully operate within a disembedded social and cultural framework that detaches spiritual striving from its transcendent sources, that is, whether the conditions of secular modernity still permit ontologically grounded articulations of fullness. The central difficulty in Taylor’s analysis is assessing the viability of recovering a sense of transcendent sense of wholeness—or “fullness”—in a secular context. Even as we construct meaningful lives, we remain haunted by the sense that something has been occluded or forgotten. The inability to even grasp the possibility of relating to a transcendent spiritual experience is perceived as a sense of absence, which is deeply lived and felt as a loss (Taylor 2002, pp. 39–40, 42).

Exclusive humanism, especially through the rise of the buffered self, blocks access to transcendence. This, I contend, is the true heart of fragilization and deeply affects Taylor’s understanding of the ethic of authenticity. Authenticity in secular modernity is not simply a new form of inwardness. Rather, it is a morally and ontologically thinned version of older spiritual aspirations. Similarly, fragilization is not merely a psychological reaction to pluralism but a structural symptom of our detachment from transcendent sources of meaning. Bruce Ward (2014) emphasizes the importance of the distinction between immanence and transcendence for the overall argument of *A Secular Age*, while noting that Taylor offers little indication of how the two might be related (p. 271). This observation, I suggest, helps to clarify what I have sought to show throughout this paper, namely that Taylor’s argument is marked by a continual oscillation between the sociological and the ontological perspectives, as well as between reinterpreting the past through the lens of the ethic of authenticity and allowing the past to break through against the trajectory of secularity. It is this oscillation that gives rise to ambiguity and reveals the internal tensions within Taylor’s overall argument.

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Notes

- ¹ Taylor distinguishes among three conceptions of secularity: Secularity 1, which refers to the disembedding of religion from its social and political frameworks; Secularity 2, which denotes the decline of religious faith and practice; and Secularity 3, which describes a radical transformation in the conditions of belief and in how human experience relates to the spiritual (Charles Taylor 2010a, p. 20).
- ² In *After Heaven*, Wuthnow (1998) distinguishes between “dwelling” and “seeking” as two modes of spiritual orientation in relation to the sacred. “Dwelling” is related to the established authority of tradition, grounded in conformity to rules and secure doctrine, whereas “seeking” cultivates a more personal, fluid, and pragmatic response to the spiritual. He interprets the transition toward a novel spiritual landscape as a distinctly contemporary development, locating its emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century (p. 3).
- ³ This appears to be consistent with Taylor’s earlier work on authenticity. In his *Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor argues that the ideal of authenticity does not represent a flat way to express subjective preferences but serves as a moral ideal in its own way. The core idea is that it requires a radical displacement of the moral emphasis from the objective world as a source of meaning to the inexhaustible depths of our inner world. This requires the assessment of subjective freedom as the primary moral source for self-fulfillment, in contrast to the opening to external forces that can influence the self, as well the idea (Taylor 1991, pp. 26–27). The idea of self-fulfillment cannot really make sense without a horizon of significance based on some form of social recognition.
- ⁴ This reflects, in broad terms, what Taylor (1989) calls, in *Sources of the Self*, the ideal of disengaged reason. It is a stance that abstracts from the living conditions of everyday life, operating both through the objectification of human agency capable of mastery and rational control and through the construal of the world as an independent objective reality irrespective of its historical and social conditions (pp. 21, 27, 46).
- ⁵ In this argument, Taylor seems to ground, at least in part, the social disembedding of the spiritual in sociological considerations, portraying it as dependent on the lived experience of certain individuals. Let us recall that Abbey supports her claim that the ethic of authenticity should not be regarded as a novelty along similar lines. More specifically, she maintains that, conceptually, it is perfectly possible to articulate the idea of a society consisting solely of believers in which the ethic of authenticity is also diffused, however counterintuitive this may seem. At times, Taylor undeniably gives the impression of interpreting the ethic of authenticity from a sociological standpoint, as if its significance depends on the number of individuals it encompasses. In the same way he sometimes seems uncertain about whether individualism is prevalent within the post-Durkheimian predicament and struggles to clearly define the precise scope of the culture of authenticity within our societies. However, despite such formulations, I will argue that the central issue lies elsewhere. What is truly decisive in his account is the transformation of our relation to the spiritual, especially with respect to our access to transcendent sources of meaning.
- ⁶ Taylor calls this process “excarnation,” referring to the detachment of religion from its material, ritual, and communal contexts and its transformation from a socially embodied practice into an abstract, disembodied, and purely subjective experience (Charles Taylor 2010a, pp. 554, 613).
- ⁷ In this respect, I agree with Colin Jager that the (post-)Romantic appeal for a revitalization of our spiritual commitments should be read both as a critique and as a symptom of the secular consensus engendered by what Taylor calls Reform (Jager 2016, p. 218).
- ⁸ To a certain extent, Taylor works with ideal types or typologies, employing processes of typification to develop theoretical abstractions that function as heuristic devices and explanatory constructs (Thomas 2016, p. 57). Exclusive humanism is therefore not merely a freely chosen moral framework among others, nor a contingent spiritual option, but rather an imposed worldview that operates as the dominant and inescapable background of immanent frame. This order makes immanence the primary locus of significance, affirming ordinary life while displacing participation in transcendent or higher spiritual realities. The post-Durkheimian dispensations are not merely abstract philosophical constructions. Rather, they provide a framework for describing socio-cultural dynamics that drive social change and, where relevant, the emergence of countertendencies. They function more as a continuum than as descriptions of distinct historical ruptures and clear social divisions. From this vantage point, exclusive humanism is not simply equivalent to the post-Durkheimian dispensation. Exclusive humanism constitutes a metaphysical construction, if by metaphysical we mean the articulation of a moral and spiritual horizon that determines how human life and the world are to be apprehended. The post-Durkheimian dispensation is meant to articulate the socio-cultural

dynamics of religious transformation that are, in principle, open to empirical confirmation or refutation, whereas exclusive humanism operates at the methodological level as a metaphysical construal of how our world is to be experienced and lived on the level of social ontology.

- ⁹ The “social imaginary” is not simply a collection of ideas, beliefs, or prevailing practices within a community. Rather, it refers to the pre-reflective, largely unstructured, and often inarticulate moral, cultural, and symbolic background that underpins social practices and shapes our basic pre-understanding of our relation to ourselves and to the world. For a fuller account, see (Taylor 2004).
- ¹⁰ For a critique of Sheehan’s account of Taylor’s narrative, see (Levene 2010).

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