

## *Epiphany and Authenticity: The Aesthetic Vision of Charles Taylor*

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The language of self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and self-realization have become common currency in contemporary culture. In fact, these ideas can be subsumed under the inclusive term of authenticity. Cultural critics such as the late Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch see this desire for individual self-fulfillment, for being authentic, as a form of narcissism that closes off concern for the greater issues that transcend the self, be they political or religious. For Charles Taylor, however, although a certain moral relativism can be associated with the desire for self-fulfillment, this position is in the last analysis a profound mistake. What the critics of authenticity fail to see is the moral ideal underlining this desire for authentic self-realization. This ideal is the intense desire to live one's life by a higher standard. In short, the question of the constitution of authentic human existence is a question of a moral ideal that ought to be taken seriously because the meaning of authenticity has shaped, and continues to shape, our understanding of what it means to be human.

For Taylor the idea of authenticity is a rich, vibrant, and vitally important addition to any conversation concerning what it means to be human. Authenticity, properly understood, is "a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where better and higher are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire."<sup>1</sup> Taylor's view of authenticity expresses the conviction that terms such as self-fulfillment and self-realization are not just cover stories for narcissism, nor are they terms that justify a stance that is labeled the "liber-

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 16.

alism of neutrality." Authenticity is a moral ideal that ultimately answers the question: What is the good life?

Yet, with the rise of modernity and the dissolution of the medieval synthesis, there is no longer a publicly established order of references to articulate a normative vision of authentic human existence. Given the lack of publicly agreed upon references, the question then becomes the following: How are we to determine or discover that which is most important in shaping our identity, in articulating what our ideal of authenticity is to be? Is there a source other than the self? To answer these questions, Taylor turns to aesthetics, more specifically to the notion of epiphany. An epiphany is a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance. It is in modern art and poetry that Taylor finds the clearest expression of epiphanic events. Modern art and poetry respect modernity's concern for the subject, without falling into a disordered subjectivism. Modern art is at once inward, yet it involves the de-centering of the subject. Because we now live in an age where a "publicly accessible cosmic order of meaning" is no longer possible, the idea of epiphanic art bridges the gap that has been left by this disintegration of public order. In short, the idea of epiphanic art anchors Taylor's concern with the search "for moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision."<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper, then, will be to first draw out Taylor's understanding of authenticity by focusing on the themes of identity and epistemology. Secondly, I will show how epiphanic art anchors Taylor's concern with the search for normative moral sources *outside* the subject.

For Taylor, to have an identity is not something that is optional. Deep within ourselves is a desire to have a sense of orientation within the world. We need to have a sense of who and what we are, and where our lives are leading us. From Taylor's perspective, our identity is ultimately determined by what we consider to be of utmost value, by a hypergood<sup>3</sup> that not only structures our choices but shapes the fundamental orientation of our lives. When we speak about who we are and what it means for us to be human, the touchstone is whatever hypergood we have chosen by which to structure our lives. Taylor defines authenticity as an ideal we choose and

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 510.

<sup>3</sup> For Taylor, a hypergood is an architectonic good that structures all of our moral choices. It is the ideal that helps to shape our self-constituting choices.

whereby we do what we ought to do, and not what we merely wish to do. Authenticity and identity go hand in hand, since we always see ourselves in terms of whatever ideal we have chosen in order to give structure to ourselves as persons. Of course, Taylor recognizes that there exists, more often than not, a gap between the full realization of this vision, and what we claim as our chosen ideal of authenticity. There is one thing, however, that Taylor wants to be very clear about: while we choose this authentic ideal that shapes our identity, this choice is not made within a vacuum, nor can it be. Taylor reformulates Heidegger's notion of thrownness in terms of engaged agency to show that our being-in-the-world is a matrix of already constituted meanings and values.

Why is Taylor so insistent on showing that one's identity is always already contextualized? It is in large part because of modernity's changed understanding of the nature of reason. In working out his understanding of authenticity, Taylor has concomitantly rehabilitated an understanding of human reason that goes beyond what he sees as a current debasement. The modern understanding of reason for Taylor militates against any hope of moving beyond either procedural approaches or cost-benefit analysis in order to determine what authentic human existence is.

Modernity's diminished understanding of the nature and power of reason obviously begins with Descartes's understanding of reason in terms of clarity. We now are concerned with what the thinking subject generates. We are concerned that our thoughts be ordered properly so that certainty of knowledge may follow. "Now certainty is something that the mind has to generate for itself. It requires a reflexive turn, where instead of simply trusting the opinions one has acquired through one's upbringing, one examines their foundation, which is ultimately to be found in one's own mind."<sup>4</sup> According to Taylor, this shift in how reason is conceived occurs simultaneously with the rise of modern science. With the ascendancy of science, the whole of the cosmos is now understood as neutral. This neutrality suggests that nature waits to have its purposes imposed on it.<sup>5</sup> When science neutralizes the world, and the ordered sense of being disappears, the paradigm we use to guide our life is no longer given to us in nature or society. The paradigms are found within our reasoning powers. In short, "reason is no longer de-

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, eds. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), p. 468.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 20.

fined substantively, in terms of a vision of cosmic order, but formally in terms of procedures that thought ought to follow and especially those involved in fitting means to ends, instrumental reason. The hegemony of reason is consequently redefined, and now means not ordering our lives according to the vision of order, but rather controlling desires by the canons of instrumental reason."<sup>6</sup> Because reason is no longer understood as substantive, that is, ordered to something other than itself, human reason becomes understood as an activity of making or *techne*. This new notion of reason gives rise to a view of the subject as autonomous. His or her freedom is rooted in a self-direction made by the person. To repeat, because reason has been disengaged from any order outside of itself, and the cosmos has no intrinsic meaning and simply stands at the disposition of the purposes imposed upon it by the person, human reason and existence are entirely self-directed according to orders constructed by the subject, "as against those which he is supposed to find in nature."<sup>7</sup>

This new notion of reason eventually gives rise to skepticism which leads to naturalism, utilitarianism, and formalism. For Taylor, naturalism seeks to define the human person according to the scientific canons that emerged in the seventeenth century. Behaviorism and computer theories of human knowing are such examples. But when it comes to the question of the ethical life, or what it means to be authentic, naturalism holds that goods or values are mere personal projections onto a world which in essence is neutral. Projection, then, is strictly an individual activity that can be eventually brought under voluntary control.<sup>8</sup> Naturalism becomes so attractive to the moderns, because it appears to be capable "of achieving a kind of disengagement from our world by objectifying it. To objectify it means to make it neutral, and effect the purposes which we determine ourselves."<sup>9</sup>

Again, the modern understanding of reason has given rise not only to skepticism and naturalism but also to utilitarianism and formalism. Because of modernity's grasp of reason as disengaged and its resultant skepticism, reason's task is no longer to articulate a vision of order independent of itself. The task of determining what order is now falls under the "subject's rational construct." Utilitarianism as a derivative of naturalism seeks to fill the void created by this skepticism. It recognizes a good that exists inde-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 4.

pendently of the person and this is called happiness. But as Taylor points out, instead of the higher or lower that belonged to older metaphysical views, "there is just desire and the only standard which remains is the maximization of its fulfillment."<sup>10</sup> Thus, once any notion of higher or lower is expunged from the position that reason is ordered to something other than itself, "the only rational procedure must be to sum *de facto* goods. The right solution, that which enjoys henceforth the aura of a higher or moral way is that which emerges from the rational procedure."<sup>11</sup>

Kant was acutely aware of the problem attached to this kind of moral procedure. He saw that the utilitarian position fails to take into account a hierarchy of motives: "There seemed to be no qualitative distinction left between moral and prudential."<sup>12</sup> And as Taylor has shown, Kant solved the inadequacies "in one stroke: to act morally is to act from a qualitatively higher motive than the merely prudential. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Kant's solution leads to what Taylor calls formalism. Formalism, "like utilitarianism, has the apparent value that would allow us to ignore the problematic distinctions between different qualities of action or modes of life, which play such a large part in our actual moral decisions,"<sup>14</sup> while simultaneously establishing universal principles. Therefore, the utilitarian answers the question "What should I do?" in terms of what would produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number; the formalist answers the question in terms of choices that treat "other people's prescriptions as if they were my own."<sup>15</sup>

Because the modern understands reason in terms of production, one is rational to the extent that one operates within a given standard. "To be guided by reason now means to direct one's action according to plans or standards which one has constructed following the canons of rational procedure, e.g., to be proceeding according to clear calculations, or to be obeying a law one has prescribed to oneself according to the demands of reason."<sup>16</sup> Because Taylor sees the epistemological chaos in which we have found ourselves, resulting in utilitarianism and formalism, we must extricate ourselves from this morass of rationalism by an act of overcoming epistemology. This means abandoning what he calls foundationalism. "In-

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, p. 26.

stead of searching for an impossible foundational justification of knowledge or hoping to achieve total reflexive clarity about the bases of our beliefs, we would now conceive this self-understanding as awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing, an awareness that would help us to overcome the illusions of disengagement and atomic individuality that are constantly being generated by a civilization founded on mobility and instrumental reason."<sup>17</sup> To overcome epistemology, we need to recover the primordial fact that what is valuable or worthwhile can only be attained in terms of a "background of social interchange and in light of a certain vision of what being a human being is all about."<sup>18</sup>

Taylor takes his cue from certain insights arising out of structuralism "that any act requires a background language of practices and institutions to make sense; and that while there will be a particular goal sought in the act, those features of it which pertain to the structural background will not be objects of individual purpose."<sup>19</sup> Because the demands of total clarity are impossible to fulfill, modern epistemology has created an environment of skepticism which has all but obscured the structure or nature of human living. Taylor's concern to "overcome epistemology" finds a mid-point between total subjectivism and its opposite extreme, a strange Schopenhauerianism without an acting subject.<sup>20</sup>

Epistemology's treatment of reason as instrumental has skewed our understanding of our own subjectivity and has given rise to three dominant images. The first is the image of the disengaged subject whose self-understanding is defined purely from within; our identity is no longer tied to anything outside. Secondly, because of this "punctual" view of the self our stance toward ourselves and our world is sheer instrumentality. The subject calculates whatever is necessary in order to secure its own personal welfare. Lastly, society is now conceived in terms of an aggregate of self-contained monads.<sup>21</sup> For Taylor these images of the modern identity need to be overcome along with epistemology.

The question of identity may be looked at in two ways. First, the modern understanding of personal identity sees the *individual* as a natural being

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy*, pp. 479–80.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172. Taylor sees Foucault as the best representative of the latter position. In other words, Foucault leaves us with the "will" of Schopenhauer without an acting subject.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy*, pp. 471–72.

characterized by a set of "inner drives or goals or desires and aspirations. Knowing what I am really about is getting clear about these. If I inquire after my identity, ask seriously who I am, it is here that I have to look for an answer. The horizon of identity is an inner horizon."<sup>22</sup> The second approach is what Taylor calls the pre-modern. It regards persons as parts in a larger order. Without this order we would be less than human. Being situated within this defined order answers for us the deepest questions concerning who we are and what role we play in the drama of human existence. This horizon is external to us.<sup>23</sup>

For Taylor, the pre-modern understanding of identity is no longer tenable, but neither is the modern understanding. The subjectivism of modernity is a dead end. In order to overcome the modern and the pre-modern approaches to identity, Taylor offers an alternative: "To define my identity is to define what I must be in contact with in order to function fully as a human agent, and specifically to be able to judge and discriminate and recognize what is really of worth or importance, both in general and for me."<sup>24</sup>

For Taylor, identity refers to certain evaluations that are the indispensable horizon or foundation for personal reflection and judgment. Modernity's vision of the disengaged self, grounded on the model of self-clarity and control, contradicts that concrete being who grows and becomes. "I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats."<sup>25</sup> Our identity is defined by those things that deeply matter to us. They provide the framework or horizon out of which we can judge what is good and valuable; and more importantly, they reveal how we are situated *vis-à-vis* what really matters to us. However, the full definition of a person's identity involves not only "his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community."<sup>26</sup> The very possibility of our stand on what we consider to be an authentic identity is already constituted in "a social understanding of great temporal depth. . . in a tradition."<sup>27</sup>

Reason as disengaged instrumentality disregards the rich human experience of desiring or craving to be in contact with something greater than ourselves. Not only do we desire to be in contact with this *other*, but more importantly, we want to know how we are placed with respect to this ideal,

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, "Legitimation Crisis," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, p. 258.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

whatever it may be. There is then an aspiration to wholeness, a basic need in all persons to be connected to "or in contact with what they see as good, of crucial importance, fundamental value."<sup>28</sup> Only by having an identity can we define what is and what is not important to us. Properly understood, self-realization presupposes the existence of goods or values independent of the self. It is the cultivation of these that ultimately makes our life rich, fruitful, and authentic.<sup>29</sup> In short, it is crucial to our identity to understand life in terms of a highest good, be it God or justice. The "assurance that [we are] turned towards this good gives [us] a sense of wholeness, of fullness of being . . . , that nothing else can."<sup>30</sup>

Taylor wants to overcome the epistemological quagmire of subjectivism which dominates much of modernity's self-understanding. It is a mistake to conceive our identity as an isolated solitary act of self-creativity; if our desire to be authentic is grounded in an aspiration to wholeness, which moves us beyond ourselves in order to be who we wish to be, then we need to know how we can avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism. Taylor does this by developing the idea of a framing epiphany.

For Taylor human existence is a quest for meaning and significance. Not to have a framework for this quest is to "fall into a life which is spiritually senseless."<sup>31</sup> Taylor's concern then is to find "moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate within him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision."<sup>32</sup> Here is where modern art comes into play. Taylor traces the idea of a framing epiphany to the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. This Taylor calls the "expressivist turn."

Now it is important to note that the shift that takes place in nineteenth-century artistic and moral sensibilities occurred within a cultural context where there was the gradual fading of a believable notion of cosmic order, "whose nature could be specified and understood independently of the realization/manifestation of the current of nature in our lives."<sup>33</sup> The older order grounded in an ontic *logos* was no longer viable. This passing of the older order clearly had its effect on art. For instance, where once Alexander Pope in his *Windsor Forest* "could draw upon the age-old views of the order of nature as a commonly available source of poetic images,"<sup>34</sup> this

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.



was no longer possible. Art was understood no longer as *mimesis*, the imitation of reality. Now art was conceived of as an expression of making that which is hidden manifest while simultaneously realizing it.<sup>35</sup> With the passing of a commonly shared cosmic vision, the artist then was burdened with articulating his or her own world of references. It is here where we can begin to look more closely at what Taylor means by the expressivist turn.

There is now no longer an esoteric order available to all upon inspection, this is especially true for the artist. What replaced the older "interlocking order" was the Romantic vision of a purpose of life coursing through nature. "Against the classical stress on rationalism, tradition and formal harmony, the Romantics affirmed the rights of the individual, of the imagination and of feeling."<sup>36</sup> Truth is to be found within the self. In other words, "If the order of things is not esoterically there to be imitated by art, then it must be explored and made manifest through the development of a new language which can bring something at first esoteric and not fully seen to manifestation."<sup>37</sup> Or to quote Shelly: "The poet strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms."<sup>38</sup> The expressivist turn as found in Romanticism is in effect the idea of an inner voice. It is in and through this inner voice that we discover what is true, good, and beautiful within ourselves. To have a proper moral stance towards nature or the cosmos is to have access to this inner voice. Because nature is an intrinsic source, an inner voice, we cannot hope to find outside of ourselves models on which to pattern our lives. The search must be within. Given the fact that art no longer imitates reality and that there is no fixed ontic order, the romantic artist must articulate an original vision of the cosmos. Thus, someone like Hölderlin in his poem *Homecoming* no longer plays on an established gamut of references. He "makes us aware of something through nature for which there are as yet no adequate words. The poems themselves are finding the words for us . . . something is defined and created as well as manifested."<sup>39</sup> Implicit in this expressivist turn is the belief that each of us has an original path to follow, unique to us and because of this uniqueness we are obligated to live up to this originality.

This notion of creating something which manifests or reveals what is hidden is associated with the power of the creative imagination. The work

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

of art that results from this creative play of the imagination is a "revelation which at the same time defines and completes what it makes manifest."<sup>40</sup> It is an epiphany, a "locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance."<sup>41</sup>

With the rise of modern art, however, there is again a certain shift in aesthetic vision. Art is still to be understood as epiphanic and non-imitative, but not in the same way as in the Romantic understanding. For the Romantics, the work of art is an expression of an inner voice, through which the creative imagination portrays something significant that would otherwise be hidden. The difference between the two forms of epiphany is that the expressivism of the Romantics sought to reveal "a greater spiritual reality or significance shining through the work of art itself."<sup>42</sup> Conversely, twentieth-century art shifts the locus of epiphany from something to which the work of art ultimately points, to the interior of the work itself. In other words, both Romanticism and modern art see art as a vehicle which manifests something morally significant that is hidden; what this significance is cannot be separated from the work of art. Yet for modern art, and here poetry is the best example, the epiphanic power of the work depends upon a break from ordinary discourse. For example, Wordsworth shows us the spiritual significance of things, whether people or places. But he does so using ordinary discourse, realistic descriptions. Through the power of ordinary and familiar discourse he opens us to something rich and more meaningful. Conversely, Mallarmé "speaks of the poet as ceding the initiative to words and allowing the poem to be structured by their inherent, interacting forces. . . . The poetic image is opaque, non-referential. Here the Romantic contrast between the symbolic and referential has intensified into the attempt to achieve epiphany by deranging reference. . . ." <sup>43</sup>

Most of the great Romantic artists, particularly poets, saw "themselves as articulating something greater than themselves: the world, nature, being, the word of God,"<sup>44</sup> which had been lost or had become debased. Now the moderns can certainly conceive of a "spiritual order of correspondences." But what they cannot conceive is having access to such an order without its being mediated through an epiphany brought about by the creative imagi-

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

nation.<sup>45</sup> Modern art and particularly poetry must be understood in terms of articulating what is real, but this articulation cannot be separated from the means (medium) of expressing that vision. This is the modern nature of epiphany.

Now it is clear that a certain subjectivism is inseparable from modern epiphanies because we cannot ignore the fact that an epiphany is mediated through the imagination. It is always a personal vision that is being articulated. But this does not necessarily imply the insidiousness of self-centeredness. This is not to deny that the very make-up of an artistic epiphany "can make it difficult to say just what is being celebrated: the deep recesses beyond or below the subject, or the subject's uncanny powers."<sup>46</sup> Because of this danger, guarding against or overcoming the trap of self-centeredness should be one of the primary moral and aesthetic projects of art.

Just as with the Romantics, inwardness is a significant part of the sensibility of modern art, but there is also something de-centering about the work. It is not reducible to merely the personal, even though our access to it can only be from within that framework. For Taylor, it is Rilke who best exhibits this de-centering and inwardness. For example, in the ninth *Duino Elegy* Rilke lays before us the task of transfiguring the world.

And these Things,  
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,  
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.  
They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,  
within—oh endlessly—within us! Whoever we may be at last.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,  
*invisible*? Isn't it your dream  
to be wholly invisible someday?<sup>47</sup>

Someone like Rilke has taken us beyond mere subjective expressivism. He has placed us squarely within the primary issue of the nature of epiphany. It is not just a matter of *praxis* that is at stake. It is, rather, the "*transaction* between ourselves and the world."<sup>48</sup>

In short, the epiphanic is genuinely mysterious, and it possibly contains the key to what it is to be human. The notion of epiphany identifies those sources which serve as the locus for one's authentic ideal. Epiphanies man-

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 427–28.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>47</sup> *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 201–02, quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 482.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 482 (italics added).

ifest that which is other. They issue from the call of the "world," understood as an independent matrix of meaning, from which our idea of what it means to be authentic is revealed. An epiphany discloses something beyond us that makes demands upon us, or calls us. Again, for Taylor it is in modern art and poetry that we find the clearest expression of epiphanic events. Modern art and poetry seem to respect modernity's concern for the subject, without falling into an aberrant subjectivism. Modern art is at once inward, yet it involves the de-centering of the subject.<sup>49</sup> For Taylor, epiphany works against the idea that the *telos* of human existence is merely an inwardly generated activity tied to nothing beyond itself. An epiphany frees us from the debased mechanistic world, and it brings "to light the spiritual reality behind natural and uncorrupted human feelings."<sup>50</sup> An epiphanic event functions as a source of authenticity because it enables us to see the good, and thereby empowers us to orient our life in terms of this ideal.<sup>51</sup> In other words, epiphanic art completes us "through expressions which reveal and define"<sup>52</sup> what it means for us to be authentic.

"Since the era of the great chain of being and the publicly established order of references," nothing in "the domain of mythology, metaphysics, or theology stands in this fashion as publicly available background today."<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, epiphanic art at some level encompasses some commonly held belief positions, but its stance towards these positions is much more tentative than in the old public creeds.<sup>54</sup> It is also what we can call their personal index that makes them a different kind of thing. "We know that the poet, if he is serious, is pointing to something—God, the tradition—which he believes to be there for all of us. But we also know that he can only give it to us refracted through his own sensibility. We cannot just detach the nugget of transcendent truth; it is inseparably imbedded in the work. . . ."<sup>55</sup> In the following poetic excerpts from Wallace Stevens, we find what Taylor sees as one of the clearest examples of the melding of the transcendent and the subjective:

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 476.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Taylor points to Rilke's image of the angel. There may be some general belief concerning this particular image, but as Taylor makes clear, Rilke is articulating a vision of angelic being that is radically outside of any traditional understanding.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 492.

The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us.  
The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of  
God.

After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is the essence which  
takes its place as life's redemption.<sup>56</sup>

We now live in an age where a common order of public meaning is no longer accessible. The only way we can understand the order in which we find ourselves is through a "personal resonance." Self-realization through an ideal of authenticity presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, "that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance of fulfilling life's needs."<sup>57</sup> Reading Rilke places us in a situation in which our desire for self-realization stands in relationship to something outside ourselves calling to us, making demands upon us. Rilke shows us that "the world is not simply an ensemble of objects for our use, but makes a further claim on us. . . . And this demand, though connected with what we are as language beings is not simply one of self-fulfillment. It emanates from the world."<sup>58</sup>

Each of us has an aspiration to wholeness that is only possible to the degree that we commit ourselves to something beyond our own desires. Epiphanic art discloses to us how self-determining freedom and our desire to be authentic depends on something noble, courageous, etc., that calls to us independent of our will. True freedom, therefore, means choosing between alternatives that either move us to a greater realization of our ideal of authenticity, or imprison us in a world that perpetuates a life of baseness, cowardice. Or in the words of Rilke:

But because truly being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all. Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too, Just once. And never again. But to have been this once, completely, even if only once: to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 493.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 507.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 513.

<sup>59</sup> *The Ninth Duino Elegy*, in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 199.