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INTRODUCTION

André Neher writes in his book *Ils ont refait leur âme*¹: «Genesis and Exodus meet at the crossroads of Who? and Where?». «The problem of Jewish identity», in fact, cannot be addressed starting «from the question: "Who are you?". The Jew is related to the first question posed by God to Adam in Genesis: "Where are you?". In the Hebrew problematic, it is of the same identity as God». Instead, Pharaoh, urged by Moses for the sake of the Jews' freedom, asks: "Who is God?". As in: I do not know Him. Neher explains: «You cannot ask: "Who is God?". That would be denying it. All you can ask is: "Where is God?"».

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I. INTRODUCTION

André Neher writes in his book *Ils ont refait leur âme*¹: «Genesis and Exodus meet at the crossroads of Who? and Where?». «The problem of Jewish identity», in fact, cannot be addressed starting «from the question: “Who are you?”. The Jew is related to the first question posed by God to Adam in Genesis: “Where are you?”. In the Hebrew problematic, it is of the same identity as God». Instead, Pharaoh, urged by Moses for the sake of the Jews’ freedom, asks: “Who is God?”. As in: I do not know Him. Neher explains: «You cannot ask: “Who is God?”. That would be denying it. All you can ask is: “Where is God?”»².

Here, the Québec philosopher Charles Taylor, in his monumental work *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity*³, does indeed start from the question *Who am I?*, but then sees the answer primarily in my (your, his) moral location. The *Who*, that is, is translated into a *Where*: where am I, where am I? What is my *moral space*? And the “spatial co-ordinate” meets the “temporal co-ordinate”: to pose the problem of the *horizon* (mine, yours, his) is to address a purpose. Right there, in the purpose, lies the sense, the meaning of my (your, his) life.

Not only that: the “original situation” of identity demands interlocutors. We are not children of nothingness, or of emptiness, but rather the

expression of a context, an environment, a world. Or, if you like, of a *common, public space*. We can deviate from it; a rift can divide us from it, as often happened to the prophets or the psalmists, and to masters of thought like Socrates. Even in this, however, we need a *network of interlocution*, of forms of sharing; otherwise we risk being shipwrecked, losing ourselves in madness.

And so: where do I speak from?, and to whom do I address myself?

I would add that even the castaway, as we classically represent him or her, often feels the need to leave (and launch) a message in a bottle (a sort of letter to the world): out of metaphor, it is not infrequently the space of the psalmist, the prophet or the poet and the artist. And it is also the place of not a few of us, when we try to express our bewilderment. The same symptoms of psychopathology or the same “acts out”, after all, what are they if not attempts (usually vain and clumsy) to give body and voice to suffering and the changing forms of unease?

Taylor, addressing the question of identity, proposes the *spatial metaphor: where am I? How do I fit in? Where is the good for me, where are the goods?* For his part, Massimo Cacciari⁴ rediscovers the archaic etymological meaning—for example, Homeric—of intelligence, of *nous*, of *noein*: to go, to return (consider *nostos*, the return). Again, the spatial metaphor: where does this coming and going take place? In opening oneself up, in *moving toward the other*—so it seems to me—and in *returning to oneself*, for the purpose of self-knowledge and self-awareness: know thyself! An attempt to answer the question: *who am I?* Here is the connection with the

¹ A. Neher, *Ils ont refait leur âme*, Éditions Stock, Paris 1979; trad. it. di R. Cuomo, *Hanno ritrovato la loro anima. Percorsi di teshuvah*, Marietti, Genova-Milano 2006, my English translation.

² Ivi, pp. 82-83.

³ C. Taylor, *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA (Usa) 1989.

⁴ M. Cacciari, Conference at the Festival *Filosofia al Mare, Pensiero di pensiero. Aristotele e dintorni*, Francavilla al Mare (Chieti, Italy) July 12, 2025.

identity dilemma: who am I? And therefore: where am I?

Thus the metaphysical question par excellence—what is it? —, passing through the "who am I?", becomes "spatialized" and materializes in a "where am I?", which is the classic question of the wandering Jew, also referring to the divine: "Where is God? Where are you, Lord?" Not only that: the "You" easily becomes a "you": "where are you, my friend?" Which, again, corresponds to: "who are you?" Let's imagine a little girl or boy from Gaza; in their situation, the only possible question of identity is precisely the "geographical" one: "where am I?" And the most likely answer, I believe, is: "in hell."

Moreover, in Dante's Divine Comedy, moral location coincides with spatial location: or, in other words, place corresponds to each person's identity.

Let's focus again on the comings and goings: what I am is defined through comparison with the other. Hence the fundamental nature of moving toward him/her: a sort of hand-to-hand combat with otherness, without which identity would not emerge. I can truly know myself by struggling with/against the other. *Where*, however, *does my singularity lie?* This is the moment of "returning" to myself, through which I gain awareness of my *difference* and *uniqueness*. Awareness, Cacciari emphasizes, is the basis of *my* will, different from yours, and therefore of my *autonomy* and, ultimately, of everyone's *freedom*.

In all fairness, will and freedom emerge from the coming and going, from the *tension* between the two moments: it is not a sort of first stage (the opening to the other) and second stage (the return to oneself), but rather *two simultaneous movements*. At the same time, I move toward the other and return to myself. At times the first movement may prevail, at times the other, but they are conceivable, in their complementarity, only together. To convince ourselves of this, it would be enough to ask ourselves: where do I start to approach the other? And, conversely: where do I move to reach myself?

Returning to Taylor, then, it is my positioning with respect to the good that defines my identity. But it is not a static positioning; rather, it is *an orientation*. It is *the direction* one gives to one's life, or, if you will, *its meaning*. And orientation in turn refers to a movement, to a *ceaseless search*. Thus the motif of coming and going, of shifting, of movement, toward the other and toward oneself returns. Not only that—and here the centrality of the other in my life reasserts itself with all its force—but the idea of the good and of the goods toward which one moves is profoundly tied to the historical and social context; it is not a "private" idea, but a shared one. The awareness of my singularity is nourished by a *shared network* of reference points, without which I would risk getting lost and shipwrecked, even if I didn't entirely coincide with it.

"In reference to," "relative to": to paraphrase Aristotle, we could say that *relativism can be expressed in many ways*.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini's speech on Christian relativism remains memorable: the Lord is absolute, not our attempts to understand and follow Him.

From a philosophical perspective, the monumental work of Quebec thinker Taylor⁵, among others, sheds light on the *vexata quaestio* of relativisms (in fact, I consider it far more appropriate to discuss them in the plural). There's no text that directly addresses the topic, then. Let's try to understand better.

On the one hand, our era is characterized by widespread *subjectivism*: every choice, including moral stances, seems to be entrusted to each individual's tastes, sympathies, and "experience." Not only that: from this perspective, one can abstain from taking a stand on what is good and what is bad, almost as if it were an optional extra. Be careful: this isn't the suspension of judgment, but rather its avoidance.

On the other hand, there is a rather widespread understanding of *relativism* according to which

⁵ C. Taylor, *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity*, cited.

there is a fundamental *incommensurability* between dissimilar situations, contexts, and cultures. No rational comparison between them is possible. With the risk that, at the same time, everything has value and deserves respect, while nothing has and deserves it. As if to say: A equals B. With the inevitable outcome of a sort of indifference to things: in-difference in the etymological sense; nothing would make a difference, precisely in the name, paradoxical as it may seem, of equal respect for all differences.

And then—in this regard, Taylor's lesson is extraordinarily powerful—there is the level of absolute explanations, those followed in the natural, "objective" sciences, distinct from the level of *explanations that take into account the meaning, the sense things have for us*, and do not ignore it. Or, if you prefer, explanations that refer, are relative (hence the root of the word "relativism") to the meanings for us, to the meaning things take on.

And, for our author, it is here, and only here, that moral philosophy can be situated, an ethics not unconnected to the question of what goods are, with the changes and conflicts that characterize them.