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Hearts As Large As The World

Charles Taylor's Best Account Principle as a Resource for Comparative Theologians

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Abstract

This paper examines philosopher Charles M. Taylor's Best Account principle, an epistemic tool intended for use in multicultural societies, as one possible avenue for developing a more conceptually robust comparative theology. Specifically, I engage Taylor's Best Account, or "BA" principle, with some of the trajectories suggested by Francis X. Clooney's own interreligious encounters, and Clooney's theological reflections upon these experiences. I compare Clooney's interpretation of the dictum "to have a heart as large as the world" to Taylor's notion that the most adequate interpretation of human life is the one that makes the most sense in terms of the way human lives are actually lived (in essence, what Taylor means by "best account"), and use this as an opening to what I hope will be a wider conversation about the conceptual development of comparative theologies.

Introduction

In at least two separate published works, comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney, S.J. describes a lecture he attended as an undergraduate in the early 1970's (1996: 5-6; 1998: ix). The keynote speaker was Fr. Horatio de la Costa, a Jesuit Priest from the Philippines:

Somewhere in the course of his reflections – I can't recall now what else he said – he cited Fr. Nadal's [Jerome Nadal, S.J. 1507-1580] assertion that it is part of the Jesuit vocation to have a heart as large as the world. For some reason, this simple observation was a turning point for me. It opened a new

pathway affectively: it gave a body and heart to the opening of my mind, it made it possible for . . . [me] . . . to imagine life more boldly (1996: 5-6).

Clooney has further interpreted the dictum “to have a heart as large as the world” to mean that “we need to imagine, think, empathize, pray across all the geographical and psychological distances and barriers which divide our world into parts” (1998: ix). He clearly understands this as a vital, if not a primary, impetus and resource for engaging people of diverse religious backgrounds in meaningful religious and spiritual conversations.

My aim in this paper is to explore the implications of the concept of a “heart as large as the world” for Christian theologians in general and for Christian comparative theologians in particular. This concept is important for communication between people of different religious backgrounds, and also for our understanding of religion both as a social and cultural phenomenon and as a response to questions concerning ultimate reality. I will argue that the anthropological language of philosopher Charles M. Taylor offers a helpful conceptual background for articulating the concept of a heart as large as the world, and for interpreting the importance of this image in both our understanding of the human and of ultimate reality.

My hope in writing this paper is that Taylor’s language will be seen as a help to comparative theologians like Clooney in developing an as-yet latent potentiality in their approaches: the ability to test and to evaluate conflicting faith claims in the hope of a deeper solidarity between believers of different faiths.

Before I begin with my analysis of Taylor’s concepts, though, a word about the approach of comparative theologians in general. Comparative theology is an effort to understand and to appreciate the differences between religions – not merely as an intellectual curiosity or an academic exercise, but as an urgent need in our ever shrinking world. There are many important features that distinguish comparative theology from former “theologies of religions” or “pluralistic” approaches, but for my present purposes it will suffice to say that comparative theologians make a concerted effort to enter into interreligious dialogue without presuppositions concerning the beliefs of the dialogue partner.

This is to say that comparative theology begins only with the presupposition that there is something worthwhile to be gained from interreligious encounters, and does not resort to theoretical attempts to understand what the ultimate nature or meaning of religious diversity might be before engaging in serious, open conversation with persons from diverse religious backgrounds. It is in the dialogue between religious believers (or, depending upon the situation, between believers and non-believers) that mutual understanding begins: in the direct and concrete encounter between different beliefs, different practices, different spiritualities. It is also here, in this encounter with what is unfamiliar, that I will argue our hearts can truly begin to expand – to approach the world as it is in all of its richness and diversity. I turn now to Charles Taylor’s reflections on this topic – to his analysis of the nature of the human person.

Charles Taylor: The BA Principle and the Dialogical Self

The primary feature of Taylor’s thought that I will use to analyze Clooney’s notion of “hearts as large as the world” is what Taylor terms the “best account” or “BA” principle – a

means of evaluating theoretical language against the actual situations of human life. I will also be making more general use of his concept of the “dialogical self,” which, in a word, is the notion that human identity is constituted and maintained in and through a network of relationships with others (developed in 1995: 57-68).

I will begin with analysis of the BA principle. First articulated by Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, the basis of the BA principle lies in an evaluation of scientific theories that attempt to explain or otherwise appreciate human behavior. Taylor argues that the real lives of human beings must be explained on the terms of the principle if a given scientific interpretation is to prove adequate. “The terms we select must make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses,” and the terms we use to describe our own lives are indispensable unless they can be replaced with “more clairvoyant substitutes” (1989: 58), that is, unless we can provide a better articulation that is genuinely adequate to human life as it is actually lived.¹

According to the BA principle, attempts to understand and appreciate the background of cultural contexts must search for this more clairvoyant terminology, or else be rendered null and void by the actual conditions of the culture itself. In this search, we arrive at the Best Account that can be given at any one time, and this Best Account cannot be subordinate to any conceptual or theoretical principle lest it be found inadequate to the reality it attempts to describe.

In Taylor’s concept of the dialogical self, the human individual is formed by encounters with others. This dialogical nature extends to even the “conversational” nature of our inner thoughts. For such dialogical beings, every new encounter is a new relationship that brings new possibilities for self-interpretation. It follows that the wider one’s circle of interlocutors, the richer one’s basis for self-understanding. This is generally true of all aspects of human life: learning a new language, for example, brings additional interpretive frames of reference to an individual. The ability to “think” in another language often reveals aspects of experience that remain hidden to individuals who do not speak this particular tongue. A human being can remain monolingual and lead a full, rich life – there is no doubt of this. But learning multiple languages unlocks the doors to aspects of reality which remain entirely opaque to people who are fluent only in one.

Conceptual Language and Comparative Theology: Clooney and Taylor in Conversation

Applying the Best Account principle to religious context first involves approaching religions phenomenologically as cultural responses, human responses, to our relationship with transcendent questions – for purposes of argument, I will define as “transcendent” questions about the meaning and nature of life and existence. As traditions that ask and respond to such questions, and as cultural realities, religions are a part of our lives and a part of our humanity. This is not to suggest that a human life is empty or lacking without a formal religion, but rather a demonstration of the depth of intellectual and spiritual energies present both as a source for and to be derived from religious experience. A non-religious or

¹ Here and elsewhere, I follow Taylor’s use of the term “clairvoyant” as descriptive of terms that most adequately approach the phenomena of human life in praxis (see 1989: 58ff).

non-traditionally religious person may indeed have their own types of responses to similar questions, but if a particular tradition or traditions is part of their cultural context, chances are these traditions will have given some shape to such people's reflections – if only in apparent opposition.

Religion, thus considered, represents a possible range of forms for human responses to questions that hedge on areas of ultimate concern. This says nothing about what each tradition, or each individual person, might affirm or deny in response to such ultimate questions. As a result both of the vast nature of such questions and the inherent diversity of human responses to them, by engaging a wider circle of interlocutors on the subject, one's own responses to such questions can perhaps be enhanced – in the sense that an individual's life is enriched and enhanced by learning a new language or acquiring a new skill. Through dialogue and conceptual reflection, this enhancement can potentially carry over to the level of one's religious tradition as a whole.

Universal claims about divine nature are out of the question in comparative conversation – at least in the initial stages of dialogue. This does not necessarily rule out the possibility that there are, in fact, universal claims that one can make about God, ultimate reality, or transcendence; it merely suggests that making such claims prior to engaging the other in patient, careful comparative dialogue undercut the purpose of dialogue. Blanket claims tend to create blockages that do not allow ideas or beliefs that may be radically different from one's own to be presented in an undistorted way. In order to avoid such impairments to the mutual understanding that is one of the primary goals of comparative conversation, we must proceed to universals only through particulars.

Again, universal claims may indeed be the ultimate goal of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, but these must be made with care and with consummate respect for the particulars of each partner's perspective. Reflecting upon the nature and possibility of making universal claims in the context of comparative religions, Clooney asserts:

Later and after numerous interreligious, comparative, and dialogical projects that cross many religious boundaries and draw faithful theologians from diverse traditions into numerous conversations, perhaps someone will be able to write a . . . book, simply entitled "God." That such a book cannot be written now but may be written in the future if we all do our work is something about which theologians everywhere should think (2001: 183).

The implications of Clooney's assertion are twofold. Firstly, the nature of the comparative project is such that at this stage the book "God" is impossible. This reflects the point made above: we cannot make universal claims about divinity or transcendence as it is understood by our dialogue partners based upon comparative conversations – at least at this point in our intellectual history. Bearing this limitation in mind, the possibility that universal language about "God" (and I do not think it is too much of a stretch to add that in the climate where such a book is possible, it may not in fact be titled "God") may one day arise across traditions is the ultimate hope of the comparative project – as Clooney himself states above.

Secondly, this type of comparison reveals the historical contingency of the traditions engaged in comparative conversation. This contingency does not mean that the divinity or ultimate realities at the root of these religions is/are in any way historically conditioned or contingent. Comparative conversation, on the contrary, demonstrates that our understanding and appreciation of transcendent issues is, as humans, necessarily given through the historical, cultural, and linguistic particularities of our experience. Understanding the dynamic, contingent, and relatively ephemeral nature of religious particularities at once underscores their importance in interreligious comparison and emphasizes the humility necessary not only to understand religious others, but also the humility with which one must approach one's own tradition.

While no tradition, on this view, can be taken as having a privileged window into the inner workings of providence (to use a Christian image), every tradition has a special and unique relationship with the types of questions regarding transcendence that arise within it. Because of its unique characteristics no tradition can be ignored, but no tradition can be superior to another except in terms of the unique particularities it has developed in response to its own unique background. Christians cannot be said, for example, to know more about ultimate reality than Hindus, but Hindus ought to respect and defer to the Christian tradition's answers about salvation in the person of Jesus Christ, just as Christians ought to respect and defer to Hindu traditions about knowledge of Brahman.

Toward A Best Account Theology

Where the Best Account principle is perhaps most helpful, and where its ramifications for articulating concepts of God or ultimate reality begin to show, is in the move from understanding and interpreting religious differences to developing positions with respect to the truly universal questions at the heart of all religions.

The necessity of this kind of move is illustrated in Clooney's argument that ". . . if we are committed to taking seriously what others believe, and if we assess those beliefs seriously with respect to features we find more or less attractive, we cannot suspend all judgments. Provided our judgments are open to revision and critique, little is gained by altogether ruling out arguments among religious people" (2002: 30).

What I have in mind by a Best Account theology is, firstly, a way to measure and guide such universal arguments and judgments, in order that their conclusions may be fair to all partners in interreligious, comparative conversations. It is also, and perhaps even more importantly, a way of expressing openness *religiously* and *theologically* to the revision and critique of one's own views.

This expression of theological openness, that is, of openness to the divine mystery and to the genuinely new possibilities true encounter with religious differences offers, seems to be a further component to the Best Account principle itself, and one which helps define and refine the character of the theological assumptions of comparative theology in praxis. Given as an example of the Christian tradition out of which both Clooney and Taylor articulate

their views, there appears to be a link between the Best Account and apophatic theology.² Apophatic theology, in a word, is the Christian theological concept that the divine essence is utterly unknowable and/or indescribable as it is in itself. This is certainly not the same as saying that it does not exist; on the contrary, apophatic theology affirms that divinity defies our ability to apply descriptions to it – including “non-existent.”³

Apophatic theology lends itself to the Best Account principle in the sense that, if the ultimate reality is unknowable as it is in itself, then our language can never be absolutely final or entirely adequate. All we can offer is a Best Account, and this account is perpetually open to criticism, interpretation, and adjustment. A “best account” theology affirms the latter statement simply on the basis of the Best Account principle as employed in Taylor’s work. The former statement, that a Best Account theology is an apophatic theology, quite easily and naturally lends itself to the interpretive character of the Best Account, for it allows no fixed ceiling or absolute limit to the depth of interpretive language – simply because the absolute is indescribable on the concept of apophasis. This includes the descriptive term “absolute” but does not suggest that description or interpretation is meaningless; it is just that, in Taylor’s own terms, neither description nor interpretation ever can be “complete” or finished.

This last point serves to illustrate the importance of interpretation, a central task of linguistically oriented beings. As in Taylor’s notion of self-interpretation, human beings are continuously engaged in acts of understanding themselves, one another, and the world they live in. This also applies to our relationship with an apophatic, in-itself unknowable ultimate reality. Although it may be unknowable in its own self, this certainly does not mean that human beings can have no relationship with divinity, transcendence, or whatever it is humans interpret the ultimate ground of their being to be. It is just that this relationship is perpetually dialogical – much like the network of relationships that make up an individual human identity.

This is a Christian, systematic affirmation of a Best Account theology and a comparative theology: that human beings, at least as far as religions or spiritualities are concerned, always have such dialogical relationships to an apophatic ultimate reality. Beyond this, the particulars are not necessarily unlimited, but they are subject to a perhaps infinite process of interpretation – and ongoing conversation. If the human being is a network of self-interpreting relationships, in other words, our relationship to ultimate questions is a similar sort of dialectic: it is conditioned by the interpretive frameworks of our time, place, and tradition and as such is not ungrounded, unbound, or unfounded, but it does require our engagement and interpretation – which can never be final as long as we are subject to human limitations.

² There is also a clear link between Taylor’s notion of the Dialogical Self and Christian Trinitarian theism. I have explored this connection elsewhere (Hanson), and have chosen to focus on a comparative analysis between apophatic theology and the Best Account principle in this paper.

³ See Fredericks (72-94) for a reference point on the fruitfulness of apophasis as a subject for comparison in his detailed comparison between Apophasis in Thomas Aquinas and Emptiness in the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna.

The particulars of each religion represent, address, and articulate *different* interpretations of different cultural and linguistic networks, and picture their answers radically differently. There is thus a very real difference not only between the characters of different religions, but also quite possibly between the realities they conceive of as ultimate. This conceptual stance allows for contradictory interpretations about what could, quite rightly, not even be called a universal ultimate reality. An apophatic interpretation of divinity not only allows for this, it practically invites it. Interpretation is required to relate to an apophatic reality, and the relationships which are interpreted and developed have such mysterious and ineffable bases that limited beings will necessarily arrive at genuinely contradictory conclusions, based as they are in the particularities of such beings' cultural backgrounds. This human diversity, and the diversity of human religions, is thus normal, natural, and perhaps even necessary.

The diversity of interpretations and variations does not imply that these relationships to transcendence are illusory – no more than human life itself (and hence culture – there is no *human* life apart from culture) is an illusion. Our reality is limited and interpretive or interpretative; unlimited, apophatic reality must be interpreted by limited beings such as ourselves if we are to have any relationship with it. This is the theological component to the anthropological recognition above that human diversity is normal and natural.

A Best Account theology must take as primary the situation of diversity in which human beings live their lives. If a theology is inadequate to meet this need, it must be revised and interpreted in accordance with the realities it encounters. Best Account language provides additional momentum to these ideas by articulating the universal human need for interpretation in conceptual and theological terms that are, in Taylor's language, more "clairvoyant." It also demonstrates the deep roots of comparative theological projects within these thinkers' tradition: in this case, the Christian tradition is shown as perhaps the ultimate reflective basis for Christians to do comparative work, and opens to invite others to make comparisons of their own and to reflect upon their own traditions as resources for comparison and mutual understanding.

Conclusion: Hearts As Large as the World

The ability for another tradition to become a theological resource may be part of the contextual, open-ended nature of human, and consequently religious, development. Religions are specific kinds of conversational networks. From a phenomenological perspective, religions are dialogically created and sustained, and develop accordingly.

From an anthropological perspective, when I am encountering someone with a religious background different from my own, I am encountering another with a systematically similar collection of conversations and interpretations. The particulars of the other's system are of course utterly unique, and some aspects may even be directly contradictory to my own. But the developmental processes are similar, and are processes that remain open to and are enriched by the encounter with new possibilities.

Encountering religious others expands and enriches one's own religious self-interpretation – and when the conversation is religious, this expansion can occur particularly with respect to those areas of ultimate concern discussed above. Questions about transcendent, ultimate realities are presented with a broader and deeper range of possibilities

through interreligious communication. Having theological conversations across religious boundaries casts the circle of conversation much more widely, and, perhaps in terms appropriate to Clooney's thought, more inclusively – expanding our intellectual and affective boundaries; perhaps, our hearts. By including the other in conversation, we are introduced to broader and deeper aspects of ourselves.

All of this comparison must be carried out with a view towards preserving the uniqueness of the partners. The aim of comparative engagement is not homogeneity. It is, rather, an appreciation of the diversity which comes about as the result of the unique cultural and historical developments of each particular tradition, and a recognition that such diversity is indeed a positive condition: it is an opportunity to recognize many more possibilities of human potential than a single context provides on its own. This diversity is nonexistent without the uniqueness of each particular tradition – comparison has no footing to stand on if its subjects are amorphous. If the world itself is not large, one's heart would indeed remain rather small.

In order to have a heart as large as the world, meaning the actual, wide world and its broad spectrum of human diversity, people of diverse religious backgrounds must engage in meaningful theological conversations. To grow and to mature, to become well developed as a human being, it is important to cast one's net widely in terms of the interpretive possibilities one welcomes. It is, of course, impossible to understand every language, every culture, or every religion in full, fluent depth and detail – mortal limitations have a way of prevailing here. But mortality does not diminish the importance of keeping one's self open to the possibilities that the encounter with others brings – to the many different responses, and many different questions of ultimate concern that make up our world's religions. These are questions to which our hearts must remain open if they are truly to encapsulate and overcome the deep divisions in our world.

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