

Charles Taylor's ontological hermeneutics and the question of existence in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*

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Abstract

Charles Taylor's contribution (1964-2007) to the question of human existence expands across a wide range of areas to include ontological hermeneutics, linguistics, philosophy, and ethics. His Christian sensibility colors his philosophy of human existence which proposes that the self finds itself as a moral linguistic being who can exist only against a background of distinctions of moral worth and value and who is embedded in a world of meanings and dialogical relation with other linguistic beings. Marilynne Robinson's acclaimed novel *Lila* (2015) is an account of the life of a young woman damaged by poverty, abandonment, and neglect and at the end healed by God's grace. In fact, *Lila* is the story of how Lila, the title character, in her attempt to understand the meaning of existence through her being in the world and her linguistic awareness finds the answer to her questions in a higher sense of the good, the mystery of grace. In this study, first the dominant theses of Taylor's philosophical anthropology will be discussed followed by a discussion of Robinson's stand – which accords with that of Taylor – against the naturalistic theories of the self. Finally, the way the character's interpretation of human existence accords with Taylorian framework is explored.

Keywords: Charles Taylor, Marilynne Robinson' *Lila*, existence, hermeneutics, self-interpretation, dialogical self.

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1. Introduction

In this paper the attempt is to compare Charles Taylor's philosophical thought with Marilynne Robinson's views as exhibited in her most recent novel, *Lila* (2015). Taylor and Robinson give a hermeneutic and moralist dimension to the understanding of human existence. Taylor's hermeneutic affinities are more with the later tradition of ontological hermeneutics in the twentieth century, with figures like Heidegger and Gadamer. Though hermeneutics in the theological, legal, literary, and epistemological traditions mostly refers to textual interpretation, in the Taylorian tradition interpretations are those of meanings in the world and they tell us about human existence.

This strand of hermeneutics in Taylor's philosophical thought is rooted in his antinaturalistic tendencies. Hermeneutic aims at digging out meaning and as such only meaningful things are objects of its study. As Taylor maintains, the "reductionist temper" of naturalism challenges the fact that physical entities and even mental entities contain or express meaning (Taylor, 2014, p.3) and seeks to explain every phenomenon, mental or physical, meaningful or not, under the mechanistic laws discovered by sciences. However, antinaturalistic stands, like that of Taylor's, insist that thoughts and actions are irreducible to natural laws and unlike objects of natural sciences they are normative and can be regarded right or wrong, moral or immoral, proper or improper, correct or incorrect. The idea of normativity of thoughts and actions that antinaturalist movements emphasize suffuses Taylor's thought because of his affinity with "post-Heideggerian hermeneutic." For Heidegger, "the normativity of thought and action has its basis in our *being-in-the-world*" (Smith, 2000). Humans' thoughts, actions, and concerns are subject to their being in the world and their experiences, and these concerns are continually interpreted and reinterpreted by their agent, the self. Furthermore, in the course of interpreting its concerns, thoughts, and actions, the subject constitutes its existence. For, as Smith points out in reference to Heideggerian *Dasein*, "human existence is constituted by the meanings things have for it, meanings determined more or less explicitly by self-interpretations"; according to Taylor, interpretation is a structural feature that is sustained for the self in order to gain an understanding, though slight, of human existence. Only in this sense hermeneutics takes its ontological turn and becomes part of Taylor's central philosophy of human existence. In his *Human Agency and Language*, Taylor postulates this central thesis: "Human beings are self-interpreting animals." This thesis, which Taylor believes differentiates the sciences of man from the sciences of nature, assumes that human beings constitute the meaning of their existence through self-interpretation. In an attempt to understand human existence and the world, one takes on the power of interpretation and meaning formation. Taylor's hermeneutic tradition is more concerned with meaning and how it is related to human existence rather than the act of interpretation and maintains that a *knowing* subject lives in a world of meaning.

Here the question of knowledge comes to fore too. In contrast to Cartesian and Lockean theories of knowledge which propound that objective, disengaged, neutral, and scientific ideas and data form our knowledge of the world, Taylor, following Merleau-Ponty and others (p.146), maintains that our knowledge of and access to the world is attained via perception. First we perceive the world around us and then we reflect on, understand, and interpret it. Taylor believes that the kind of knowledge attained through perception requires our engagement with the world: "the condition of our forming disengaged representations is that we must be already engaged in coping with our world, dealing with the things in it, at grips with them" (Taylor, 1995). Therefore, the engagement with the world and the kind of pre-reflective knowledge achieved from it represents the agent's concerns, worries, desires, purposes, and experiences, and is inseparable from the world the agent lives in. While classical 'data' and 'ideas' were static, perceptual knowledge comes from the agent's lived experience and is bound up with the agent's past and the present perceptions, experiences, and his being in the world.

The central thesis of Taylor's hermeneutic tradition might be summarized as such: human beings are self-interpreting animals whose behavior, concerns, values, and desires are inseparable from how they interpret themselves, and they are linguistic animals that articulate their interpretations of the world in linguistic ways that are both expressive and constitutive of their actions and feelings. Through language they think about the meaning of things in the world and also create one. It should be born in mind, however, that the idea that human beings are language animals does not imply the subject's self-defining instrumental freedom in language. For, as said, the semantic dimension is governed by rules and norms that a self is always bound to and situated in, and *my* language is always *our* language, that is, it is always for us. That a language exists and is maintained within a community, Taylor believes, shows another feature of a self. "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (Taylor, 1989). One's self-interpretation and self-definition starts with the question 'Who I am' and this can be answered through interchange with the others, i.e., defining where I am in a family, a social space, in a moral space, and in my relations with others. The meaning that things have for me is constructed out of the meaning they have for my community. Thus, one's interpretation of one's self or the world can never be complete, because there are some features that cannot be represented and expressed in words and because, the self's structural power as a linguistic and self-interpreting being is always dialogical and situated in a community.

This brings us to a distinctive feature of Taylor's version of hermeneutics: human beings are moral subjects. Because "dialogicality" (Taylor, 1991) puts the self in relation with others and mutual relations imply moral 'ought' and 'ought not'. As such, interpretations are conducted in languages that tell us about the distinctions of worth and the qualitative values the agents have in relation to themselves, others, or the good they hold. The way we understand ourselves is constitutive of our beings and the articulation of the values, concerns, desires, and moral feelings we have are not only constituted by the background moral frameworks we have but also produce and enhance these frameworks. In his *Human Agency and Language*, Taylor maintains that:

[...] our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation'. I mean by that a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value.

So, moral feelings such as dignity, self-respect, injustice, justice, or pride are articulated based on their qualitative differences and worth, and Taylor goes on to say that human life is informed by such distinctions of worth and that human existence has a moral dimension and is only understandable in relation to the good. The sense of good, the principles of right or wrong, correct or incorrect are not things to be determined independently of our being in the world, and our socialized and historical viewpoints. Moreover, two points need clarification. First that by the term moral Taylor suggests a broad meaning, that is, the desires and purposes that are important because of their worth. As such, in addition to notions like justice and respect for other people's life and well-being, it includes questions about our own dignity and what makes our lives meaningful. Also articulation can be in a variety of forms. It can be conveyed through poetry, novel, literature, visual arts, music, dance, prayer and rituals. "An allegory of virtue and vice as two animals, say, can tell us something which could also be formulated in propositions about virtue and vice" (Taylor, 1995). Moreover, the term strong evaluation might cause confusion and contradiction, since it assumes a pre-reflective stance; while earlier it is said that in the act of self-interpretation the subject does not prefigure or pre-mediate before its perception of the things that constitute its experience. It seems that the focus is on the strong value/worth, not the act of evaluation.

Drawing on Heidegger's concept of time and being, Taylor also argues that self-understanding has a temporal turn, that is, it is impossible to know our *selves* without understanding it through time, how our life unfolds in a temporal structure, through past, present, and future. This can be achieved through narrative by which one's direction of life toward the values one holds is articulated. We grasp our lives and selves in terms of an "unfolding story"; the narrative of our becoming, of how we have changed, where we have started from, and where we are going to (Taylor, 1989, p.47). Thus, Taylor's view of human existence and the self takes a hermeneutic provenance that extends onto the questions of language, knowledge, and ethics.

Robinson's most recent fictional exposé of her view of ethics and the self are to be found in *Lila* (2015). In this new novel Robinson returns to Gilead to tell the unforgettably interesting, shocking, and exquisite story of Lila who lives in poverty, fear, loneliness, wonder, shame, and pride. Lila lives the early four years of her life in a cabin where she is often left under a table "hugging herself against the cold" (Robinson, 2005) and unable to cry anymore – though if she have any power to holler, somebody would shout out "shut that thing up or I'll do it." Then one night Doll, the woman who always comes and grabs long-legged Lila out from under the table, steals her from the neglect she is in and brings her up. Together they lead an itinerant life along with a group of drifters, roaming around the country and asking for work, hiding from anyone of Lila's family who might be after them only "for the sheer devilment of it", and always with nothing but their love and their pride. After many years of wandering around the countryside Lila steps into the church of John Ames, the minister in *Gilead*, to take shelter out of rain and the widowed Reverend John Ames falls in love with her. Lila continues living in Gilead in a shack near the town and during the days she comes to the town doing some housework, growing roses on Ameses' graves, sneaking into Ames's house and tending the garden she keeps there for herself. One day after Reverend Ames asks her if there is something to do for her to sort of repay her favors she tells him "you ought to marry me" and then spends the rest of the day in anger and shame of what she has said. Later; however, Reverend marries her.

Talking about *Lila*, Robinson pinpoints the most significant thesis in her body of work, that is, the mind is absent from contemporary discourse and that it is the influence of a kind of "crude scientism" that cannot "articulate the fact of mind, the fact of imagination, the complexity of consciousness" (Walker, 2014). Robinson keeps saying that according to true science the mind is the most complex object in the world and she believes we are privileged to be in contact with this complex system and "there is an infinite interest in cultivating it" (Walker, 2014). Taylor and Robinson put forward the same polemic against modern thought, though in different terms. They believe that humans live inward and conscious lives and the complexity of their experience could not be reduced to scientific objective exploration (Robinson & Taylor, 2014). The Cartesian duality of mind/body is rejected in their theory and they believe that like body the mind is situated in the world and the primordial access to knowledge is the self's active coping with the world. Taylor contends that one's self-interpretation is deeply contingent with one's being in the world and one's perception of it. In her *Absence of Mind*, Robinson projects the same thesis: "Anyone's sensory experience of the world is circumstantial and cultural, qualified by context and perspective, a fact which again suggests that the mind's awareness of itself is of a kind with its awareness of physical reality." The terms Self-interpretation, self-awareness, and inwardness seem to be interchangeable in her thought. Robinson explains that by self-awareness, she does not mean merely "consciousness of one's identity, or of the complex flow of thought, perception, memory, and desire, important as these are," but that she means primarily "the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises." Similarly, Taylor believes the self to be a moral subject and a strong evaluator and self-interpretation to be an evaluation of the distinctions of worth that shape an agent's moral framework, articulated in a language that is expressive of moral qualities. In Taylor's and Robinson's views, the self is structured and privileged by the ability to "speak the

word "I" and mean by it a richly individual history of experience, perception, and thought"; the self has the mind that is the source and conduit of experience, perception, and thoughts of the past, present, and the future, and that constitutes our being in the world. In their work, Taylor and Robinson attempt to free the self from the modern myths of the self, propounded by positivists, behaviorists, Neo-Darwinists, and Freudians. These "reductionist" myths of the self-cast a spell on many human qualities such as 'generosity,' 'compassion,' 'empathy,' 'gratitude,' 'self-awareness,' 'inwardness,' and 'self-sacrifice,' by terms such as 'self-interest,' 'selfishness,' 'neurosis,' 'psychosis,' 'self-doubt,' 'egoism,' 'delusion,' 'natural selection,' 'survival of the fittest,' and 'soft-core altruism.'

Lila thinks a lot about things, tellingly interesting things. She is truly in contact with her mind. Living in Gilead, often she goes to church on Sundays, for it is interesting for her that people talk about being born and dying and there the priest, Reverend Ames, talks about "the good Lord, how he does one thing and another" (Robinson, 2015). These church talks and probably other things that have happened to her in her life make her wonder about a question: "why things happen the way they do", and one day in an early morning she knocks at the Reverend's house to ask him this question. Reverend Ames tells her that he has lived his life wondering about this question, that "life is a mystery, and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it. And the grace of God is also a very deep mystery", and then she returns to her shack. This does not end here, though. Her coming to Gilead, her new life with Ames, and her becoming a mother make her ponder her past and present life, the things that happened to her, her being in the world.

When she and Doll start a drifting life they join a group of drifters led by Doane who always tell them that the churches and preachers want to take their money (as if they have any) and that they should not trust them. Initially Lila does not believe or does not understand Ames' answer to her question, that God's grace is the answer to every happening. She even begins tending the graves of Ames' family to show him that she is not a fool to believe what he says: "Let's see if he thinks it was God who scraped the moss off the headstone and put the ivy there. Who cut back the yew shrubs so some light could get through? Who would make the roses bloom." Also on a Sunday she walks out of the church with a bible, knowing that if she had asked people for a bible they would be happy to give her one. But she does not want to make them think she is interested in religion; she just wants to know the things Ames talks about and probably understand the answer to her question. Lila decides to practice writing by copying pages from the bible and this is how her interpretation takes a linguistic turn. To remind, Taylor maintains that the question of language and meaning are interrelated and that language is the medium through which the self-construes its being. The first time she picks up the bible to read, it falls open to these lines: "*in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee... No eye pitied thee.*" Immediately after copying these words, Lila thinks about herself, the child under the table. She thinks that "somebody had to have pitied her, or any child that lives." Then she continues reading: "*I passed by thee, and saw thee weltering in thy blood.*" Lila remembers seeing newborn children and she thinks that seeing them one feels pity and wants to wash them and wrap them warm, and all; however, trying to think of the cabin she is born in she only remembers "skirts brushing against her, hands not so rough as other hands. That might have been the one who made her live." As earlier discussed, in Taylor's view, the self has the ability to interpret the meanings in the world through its experiences that are as well shaped by its interpretation. Lila interprets the meaning of things around her by going back to her experiences, her perceptions as a newborn baby and though initially she says "what did it matter", gradually she starts pondering her existence. A few nights later, because of those lines in the bible she again starts thinking about how her birth and living could have happened, since she was so "sickly", and wondered who "had bothered with her even that much, to keep *body* and *soul* together." By now, her only answer is Doll; for she knows Doll more than anyone and she is the one who grabs her out from under the table, washes her, feeds her, mothers her, and tells her 'Live,' "not once, but every time she washed and mended for her." For, as Taylor says, one's knowledge of the world is achieved through

perception and perception is inseparable from the agent's experience of and engagement with the world.

Tellingly, the next lines Lila starts copying are from Genesis, the book of creation: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.*" Whatever she sees, hears or reads make her think about her being in the world. These lines remind her of the time she enjoys an early morning, when dawn's light darkness turns into sunlight and she hopes if the old man happens to come there, he comes in the morning because then the lightness of day lets the white flowers around the shack that she has planted to show their beauty; perhaps because she does not want the meadow look *waste* and *void*. When she with Doll and others drift from place to place, they always try to keep their dignity. Though poor, they keep clean and walk with their heads up. Lila has lived a great part of her life with these people and the experience has constituted her sense of how she should be and how she understands her being in the world and her relation with others. So she feels embarrassed if old Ames sees her place in misery and roughness. She continues copying:

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

The Book of Creation talks about existence, the source of the entire existence, the spirit of God, and the fact that Lila turns to copying this book is significant of her gradual understanding of the answer Reverend Ames gives her. Moreover, this time after copying the above-mentioned lines she writes her name: "Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl". It seems that by thinking about existence in terms of her copying, she is unwarily finding her being. As Taylor's hermeneutic tradition maintains, human beings are self-interpreting linguistic animals and in the process of interpreting the meaning of existence their power of interpretation, language and their being in and involvement with the world cooperate. Interestingly, when she again turns back to the page from the book of Ezekiel, which she has dogeared, she reads about Ezekiel's vision, in which he saw the creatures that had the *likeness* of a man, and that had four faces and four *wings*, she starts writing her name again, Lila Dahl, and she starts thinking about herself, her life, and Doll rescuing her from that cabin:

[...] and there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she never saw, of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had the *likeness* of a name. She had the *likeness* of a woman, with hands but no *face* at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the *likeness* of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the *likeness* of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out. And when Doll took her up and swept her away, she had felt a *likeness* of *wings*. She thought, Strange as all this is, there might be something to it. (p.68, emphasis added)

Of course there is something to it. Lila uses the signs, ideas, and words that she is involved with through the medium of language in order to interpret her life and what Doll has done to it, and feels that Doll has been an angel to her.

What Lila knows about existence comes from her lived experiences, which include her past life of drifting, poverty, but love and pride and her present life in Gilead where she marries a preacher to whom she always puts the most interesting and the hardest questions (p.99) and where she listens to Ames and his preacher friend old Boughton talking about resurrection and the Last Judgment. Her experience is also constituted through her writing practices. However, she does not know that these involvements

shape the meaning of and the answer to her question, her existence. She only perceives every moment of her life and later she reflects on it. Often she thinks: "she'd do this and think about it afterward."

Every dawn Lila washes herself in the river and sits waiting for a bit of light to start copying. She becomes more interested in reading and copying, finds comfort in it, and she even buys candles so that she might write in darkness too. The next thing she starts copying is not from the bible, but a note from Ames in answer to her 'Question.' First she copies the early lines of the letter:

Dear Lila (if I may), You asked me once why things happen the way they do. I have felt considerable regret over my failure to respond to your question. You must have thought that it has never occurred to me to wonder about the deeper things religion is really concerned with, the meaning of existence, of human life. You must have thought I say the things I do out of habit and custom, rather than from experience and reflection. I admit there is some truth in this. It is inevitable, I suppose.

Form these lines she understands that what she wonders about in her question, that human life of which she remembers and sees a bitter, sorrowful share is called 'existence'. Immediately after copying these lines she starts copying from the Book of Ezekiel: "And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished brass." Now she knows that there is a word for the only thing she knows about, existence. She believes that the ordinary days and evenings they live and experience is what people call existence. It is the "evening and the morning, sleeping and waking. Hunger and loneliness and weariness" and she wonders why people want more and more of it, why the old preacher wants more of his sorrow, of the house empty of his wife and child. She thinks it is maybe because they need it even if there is no great pleasure in it, like how Doane and Marcelle wanted it. She remembers how much Doane loved Marcelle and how much the others enjoyed watching them when Doane tied ribbons in Marcelle's hair, and around her neck, wrist, and ankle and Marcelle laughed out of pleasure of it. But when the hard times started and Doane could not find work and even finding work looked like pity, Doane again looked for her and stayed next to her but it seemed as if he was angry at Marcelle and nothing was like before. Thus Lila thinks, all right, people want more of it because they need it and because they could find pleasure in it, even in "a sip of water." She says there was no reason or no need in Doane's tying a ribbon in Marcelle's hair, but Marcelle found pleasure in that and loved him for that; "You don't need somebody standing beside you. You don't, but you do" because there is pleasure in it and because you cannot "take away every pleasure" out of life. Lila is a philosopher!

She continues copying:

*I realize I have always believed there is a great **Providence** that, so to speak, waits ahead of us. A **father** holds out his hands to a child who is learning to walk, and he **comforts** the child with words and draws it toward him, but he lets the child feel the **risk** it is taking, and lets it choose its own courage and the certainty of **love** and **comfort** when he reaches his father over— I was going to say choose it over safety, but there is **no safety**. And there is no choice, either, because it is in the nature of the child to walk. As it is to want the attention and encouragement of the father. And the promise of comfort. **Which it is in the nature of the father to give**. I feel it would be presumptuous of me to describe **the ways of God**. Those that are all we know of Him, when there is so much we*

don't know. Though we are told to call Him Father. And I know it would be presumptuous to speak as if the suffering that people feel as they pass through the world were not grave enough to make your question much more powerful

*than any answer I could offer. My faith tells me that God shared poverty, suffering, and death with human beings, which can only mean that such things are full of **dignity** and **meaning**...*

Ames has a theological understanding of human existence which he expresses here through the analogy of the relation of a child and his father. In his view, God's sovereign grace bestowed on humans in his providence, comforts, promises, and love is God's constant hand that guides their existence. Yet, God's fatherly love does not restrict human choice; for He lets man perceive the certainty and comfort that he can find in His haven. In Him, man finds the ultimate comfort, love, dignity, and meaning. It is in our nature to find the meaning and direction of life on our own, like a child who wants to walk on his own, but we also feel the need for a higher source of meaning to confirm our effort and comfort us in our quest for the meaning of our being. Ames tells Lila that God has given great dignity and meaning to the life of the poor and the sufferer, though we are to do anything to stop suffering in this world. In fact, he tries to say that there is a great mystery in the ways of God and the meaning of existence; one human are unable to understand. As mentioned, in Taylor's view of the dialogicality of the self too, the language of existence is a never-ending dialogue between us and the world.

After reading and copying the letter, Lila thinks that "well, he forgot he was writing to an ignorant woman", and that she has to study that more. But the fact is that Lila knows suffering and poverty, because she has experienced them and knows the dignity Ames talks about, because she, Doll, and Doane's people have felt that every time they have wordlessly accepted the sign "No Help Wanted Here", and every time they have worked until they could hardly lift their arms to take the half of the money they have agreed on for a work. Lila believes she does not understand what Ames calls the ways of God, but her perception of the things around is not much far from the reality Ames realizes. Moreover, it must be noted that after reading Ames' letter, Lila thinks of and remembers things that fully resonate with what Ames tries to tell her. One is her way of seeing the clothes in the river and the other is the story of Moses, Exodus 2.3. Once when she is washing her clothes in the river, "her shirts and her dress look[s] to her like creatures that never wanted to be born, the way they wilt [...] into themselves, sinking under the water as if they only want [...] to be left there, maybe to find some deeper, darker pool", and when she lifts them out and holds them by their shoulder "they look [...] like pure weariness and regret. Like her own flayed skin." Lila has felt this weariness many times; when as a kid she was left under the table biting her hand, when she was left behind and had to spend a day on the church steps feeling what being an orphan means, and the time she was in a whorehouse in St. Louis trying to look beautiful, and to bear men's eyes and smiles. But her clothes begin "to seem like things that could live", when the sun passes through them. Likewise, when Lila is weary of her being, God's love like the sun tells her live. God's providence sends Doll to rescue her from under the table and from feeling like an orphan. His providence puts the word 'Iowa', of all the words, on Lila's mouth, when she wants to escape from St. Louis and a woman who happens to be going to Iowa asks her where she is going. Lila remembers at the church once they talk about the story of the Queen of Egypt who finds a baby in a basket floating on the water and takes him. Lila believes the Queen tells him 'Live', the word God says in the book of Ezekiel. The fact that Lila, after reading the letter and Ezekiel falls to such thoughts, is significant. She tries to constitute her interpretation of human existence via the signs, objects, experiences, and meanings, whether of past or present,

Taylor speaks of. The day Ames gets her baptized near the river, while he is reading the sacraments and wants to mention her name ("Lila Dahl, I baptize you—"), Lila says that it is not her name and that no one has ever said what her name is. Ames tells her that if he baptizes her with this name, then she *is* Lila Dahl. The point is that, in fact, what she thinks about baptism (as giving her comfort, as being meaningful) comes true. Baptism gives her a true identity, since before this she does not think of her name as being truly hers and it also comforts her soul, for she is always shameful of her past, of being in a whorehouse, and Baptism, as Ames says, makes her a "newborn babe", because she is washed "in the waters of regeneration." Lila believes in that, too. After she is married to Ames, she often listens to Ames and Boughton talking about salvation, resurrection, and the soul and she becomes so much interested in the idea of resurrection, for she can see Doll again, in the resurrected life. However, once Boughton talks about those who are lost, the Last Judgment, and hell and Lila decides that she hates the idea of resurrection, because none of the people she knows from her past life have heard about baptism, the soul, the Last Judgment or being saved, and as such they all would be lost. In addition, she hates the thought that those people and Doll must come out of their graves to answer for "lives most of them never understood in the first place. Such hard lives", and that Doll feels shameful and guilty again, after all those years of hiding these feelings. Thus, she thinks "Better Doll should stay in her grave, if she had one" not in hell and the next day she goes to the river and washes the baptism off her; so that if there was a resurrection she could be with Doll not among the saved. The thought of hell reminds her that "existence can be fierce" (106) and she copies lines of Ezekiel's vision of the fire going up and down among the living creatures. The hard times of past life spring back to her mind; there were times when blowing dust made them "shake sand out of their hair and their blankets and clothes" and "sleep with damp clothes over their faces." She remembers the fierceness of existence in the fact that Doane left her behind, because the times were hard and he could not feed someone who was not of his family, in the nights that no one opened the doors pounded on for help. She even is frightened that fierceness and "wildness" of existence might "carry away" her child and herself. It seems that Lila is trying to interpret and reinterpret human existence (something she does time and again later) via her new experience of listening to Boughton. She knows that "so much of existence is all that bitterness and fear." Further, she is continually making distinctions of worth, like: "better Doll should stay in her grave, if she had one" or "how could the world go on the way it did when there were so many people living the same [in poverty] and worse?."

However, this does not end here. Lila still has more things to experience and perceive in order to shape her interpretation of human existence. She thinks that what Boughton says about some people being lost is impossible, because Ames always says that God is kind and from the book of Ezekiel she has understood that someone (she still does not know that in Ezekiel God is the speaker) helps the weary and the cast out; so she thinks "who could want to cause her [Doll] more sorrow?" Above all, it is love that she thinks is irreconcilable with that meaning of existence, as something that is going to end in some people being resurrected in life and some being lost in death and hell. One cannot bear the thought of her loved ones being in hell. Lila hates the thought of hell and gets herself "unbaptized", because she loves Doll. And then after she thinks she has washed off the baptism, she is worried that this may harm the child she is bearing, and then again she thinks that she must keep off such fears for the sake of the child like Doll who though full of fear and shame continued living with Lila (p.106). Ames tells her "thinking about hell doesn't help me live the way I should. I believe this is true for most people. And thinking that other people might go to hell just feels evil to me, like a very grave sin." In fact, love is a constitutive good that shapes their interpretation of life and gives meaning to their experiences and actions. For Ames the answer to everything is God's grace, which is synonymous with love, as Robinson says and portrays in her body

of work. He tries to help Lila understand this love by his notes, preaching, conversations, and interpretation of the biblical stories Lila reads. Lila keeps on writing when she marries Ames, too; and again she copies lines from the book of Ezekiel:

Moreover I will make thee a desolation and a reproach among the nations that are round about thee, in the sight of all that pass by. So it shall be a reproach and a taunt, an instruction and an astonishment, unto the nations that are round about thee, when I shall execute judgments on thee in anger and in wrath, and in wrathful rebukes. [...]
Lila Ames. Lila Ames.

Lila likes copying from Ezekiel because she finds herself and Doll in it and she knows what things like desolation and reproach mean. She likes Ezekiel because he “knows what certain things feel like” (p.126). Doll with that stain on her face had felt desolation and reproach, when people stared at her face with astonishment wondering what was on her face and Doll would just bear their gaze. Like Ezekiel they had heard the voice above the “firmament” with “no speech nor language” saying “guilty” or asking them to hold up their head against their shame or their weariness, though it was difficult for them. She likes Ezekiel, for he knows that voice and she hates those people who look at them as if saying “Why don’t you get your raggedy self out of my sight. Ain’t one thing going right for you. Existence don’t want you” Thinking about Ezekiel, Lila feels the shame of the baby weltering in her blood, the shame of having no one to look after you.

Once she asks old Ames “you know that part where it says, ‘I saw you weltering in your blood’? who is that talking” and Ames says that it is God talking to Israel and that Ezekiel is full of poetry. Yet Lila who has seen herself through these lines tells him that what God says here is true and that she knows it. Then Lila asks him something that seems to be her wondering at her past, at her being cast out in her childhood: “But why would God let somebody throw her out like that in the first place?” (p.129). Ames explains to her that it is a parable in which God is spoken of as a kind man who takes this child and that here “He is not God in the sense of having all the power of God” (p.129). But Lila wants to know why God’s power allows such a bad treatment of children. Ames is worried about the fact that Lila only reads Ezekiel and tells her that God’s relationship with the people in the book of Ezekiel is a special one, and that God loved them but he punished them because they were unfaithful and their faith was crucial in the history of the world. Ames worries that Lila in her attempt to find the answer to her question, to the mystery of human existence may only come up with the dark side of the things. Even though Lila has experienced the thornier side of life and when reading the miseries of Ezekiel or Job she easily recognizes her and Doll’s life exemplified in the bible, she comes to the point that “if only she’d known then [when she is in St. Louis] what comfort was coming, she’d have spared herself a little.” However, it might be said that in this phase Lila still does not think of this comfort as destined to wait for us by God’s providence. Sometimes she dreams that “she was running along a road and there was Doll ahead of her, waiting for her, and she just ran into her arms, and she thought, it’s over now, I’m not lost anymore [...].” (p.206). Given that she often thinks of Doll as an angel who saves her (such as the first time she watches Ames baptizing a baby, and when she reads Ezekiel taking the cast out baby, and in both cases God is the savior), here again the savior waiting ahead of her on the road reminds one of the gracious God.

Ames always thinks about her questions and wants to give her a better answer. So one morning he reads a sermon he has written the night before for her. The sermon is again an answer to her first question about why things happen the way they do. He says that as long as we think that the things that happen are the consequences of our guilt or our deservingness rather than God’s providence for us, they are “utterly hidden for us” He believes it is because of the fragmentary nature of our experience that we cannot

account for the reason of the things happening to us by drawing from the past events. The past we know differs from the true past, for the parts of our experience "don't add up." (As discussed, Taylor believes that the self's embodiment in a socialized and historical network of experiences and a community of interlocutors leaves the self's interpretation of human existence always incomplete.) Yet Ames does not try to say that the reasons are not a mystery, for he believes that "they are hidden in the mystery of God." He explains that misfortunes help you understand the future blessings that "you would not have been ready to understand as blessings if they had come to you in your youth, when you were uninjured, innocent." So it is divine providence that things happen the way they do, so that blessing can be understood as blessing not a simple happiness by coming after misfortune and loss. Ames reminds Lila that "this is not to say that joy is a compensation for loss, but that each of them, joy and loss, exists in its own right and must be recognized for what it is." Much of our existence is a mystery to us, because it "rests with God" who is unknowable, says Ames, but gracious for creating human beings with the power to understand a slight part of existence and their selves. Finally, he ends by saying and meaning "God is good", though Lila replies "some of the time" because she believes that she has lived with "heathens" who are good and do not deserve God's hell. But Ames, referring to her own experience with the bible, reminds her that the baby in Ezekiel was taken up by God, because God "looks after the strays." Ames tells her that Ezekiel says "how He bound himself to Jerusalem when he told her, *Live*" even when those people become unfaithful. Now it seems that Lila knows the parable of her existence better. In the figurative sense, Doll is God who tells her 'Live' and whose grace and blessing let her live even when things felt so final to her, like when she stepped into Gilead and thought that it was the end of her life (p.219); without the bitterness of her life she would not understand the blessing of the present, like that "Israel would know the meaning of grace because they had suffered."

Coming to Gilead makes Lila and her interpretation of herself different. Earlier, on her arrival at Gilead and her acquaintance with Ames, Lila had wondered "what would I pray for, if I thought there was any point in it? Well, I guess the first thing would have to be that there was some kind of point in it." Whereas, at the end of the novel after her marriage and the birth of her son and after all the things she understands of God's providence, comfort, and grace, she thinks that if she has prayed in her old life it has been for the comfort Ames brought to her life and that if she prays now it is for remembering that comfort. Coming to Gilead she rethinks the course of her life and her being, for she finds herself in want of telling somebody about herself. She finds a lot about her being in her readings and she wants to make sense of them, she wants to trust people in order to feel less tired (p.58 & 89), and she learns to take what comfort the life can offer her. All these require her interpretation that -- as Taylor states -- is always embodied in a language of *we* not *I* and her relation with others, for the self is always dialogical. Ames believes that the mystery of life is resolved in the grace of God and that is a great mystery itself. For him, "that is where all these questions end." Lila's 'Question' ends in the same place, in the mystery of grace. She knows that Ames could not bear the heaven without her; so when he gets their son baptized he also touches water on Lila's brow three times, for he wants her to stay with them. Lila finally settles in the belief that she cannot bear the thought of heaven without those good people she loves. She believes the weeping boy who wanted to get rid of himself, because he thought he had killed his father, will be "shocked at the kindness all around him" (p.258) and at the divine grace that not only looks after him but also will bring his "mangy old father" to the heaven too; because the boy loves him and could not bear without him. Eternity lets her think that no matter how life seems and why things happen and all that mystery; no matter how much of a scoundrel one is love brings everything in the light of

that other life and there is no end to this love; "thanks God, as the old men would say." Perceiving this ultimate love hushes her wanderings about her 'Question': "There was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them." Brialleen Hopper believes that Robinson in her story of *Lila* "extends the reach of grace farther than she ever has before— stretching it across boundaries of literacy and class, and testing it with extremes of evil and loss, and yet it survives, lovely and glowing."

Charles Taylor gives a hermeneutic and moral clue to the understanding of human existence. He thinks that we are self-interpreting linguistic beings in a world of meaning and constitute our interpretation of the world through our living and coping with experiences, actions, concerns, and entities. Finally, we find ourselves as moral beings that exist only in relation to a sense of the good. Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* (2015) portrays the way Lila heads on interpreting the question of existence via turning inward. Where does the mystery of Grace rest? Robinson's "characters suggest we look in our own flawed selves, in our difficult lives, in our willingness or not to make peace with the irreconcilable" (Silverblatt, 2014). Lila gets involved with her experience of being in the world and gradually finds herself and her understanding of existence in relation to a sense of the good, the ultimate mystery of God's grace. *Lila* is deservedly called a "provocative and deeply meaningful *spiritual* search for the meaning of existence" (Seaman, 2015). Lila answers Taylor's definition of a human being. Being critical of approaches that "try to explain everything human beings do by talking about economic factors, political factors, drive for power," Taylor contends that though all of these are important, they lack "the spiritual dimension" (Suarez, 2000). This is what Lila eventually finds comfort in.

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