

From Authenticity to Accountability:  
Re-Imagining Charles Taylor's Best Account Principle

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A Thesis  
In the Department  
of  
Religion

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Religion) at  
Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

July 2013

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
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## ABSTRACT

From Authenticity to Accountability:  
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This dissertation explores the possibility of re-imagining aspects of the moral theory advanced by Charles Taylor. The framework of my study is moral discourse as it is, and has been, expressed in what is historically and culturally understood as western philosophy.

What might it mean to live a good life? It is upon this question that the crux of my dissertation revolves. In his tome *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor eloquently drew the distinction between a utilitarian concept of what it is right to do, and a more substantive consideration of what it is good to be. My own work has been considerably influenced by this short dialectic. Despite my sympathy with some of Taylor's arguments, my dissertation involves a considerable critique of his conclusions *vis-à-vis* authenticity and dignity. A prime focus of my analysis deals with what I contend is Taylor's unnecessarily limited descriptions of languages and embodiment.

My aim is to engage in a re-imagining of Taylor's concept of the "best account principle". I argue that in Taylor's work, the "best account" evinces a *genre* of clairvoyance on the part of a self-reading moral agent. I critique Taylor's portrayal of agents transitioning toward increasingly lucid expressions of their vision of the good. The basis of my critique is focused upon what I contend to be the narcissistic self-concern underlying Taylor's concept of moral agency. In re-imagining the "best account

principle”, I expand upon the description of embodiment to include a consideration of gender, and an examination of implied “normativity”. To this thickened portrait of embodiment I apply insights from the work of Emmanuel Levinas regarding the “I” and the “other(s)”. The juxtaposition of Taylor’s theory with that of Levinas’ will help us to transform the “best account”, from an expression of authenticity, to one of accountability.

I employ aspects of Charles Taylor’s theory in a fashion which I do not believe would beget his blessing. Mine is not the story of the making of the self. It is, rather, an indictment of the self on the grounds of accountability.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

No one accomplishes anything alone. I would like to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks to those who have given their best, to help me achieve my best. To my Mom and Da, for their support and wisdom. To my supervisors, for their trust and guidance. To Tina and Munit, for making our department a home. To Fiso and Lola, for perspective. And, to my wife Jessica, for love and inspiration. Thank you.

Study, research, and writing take time. I would like to thank Le Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture, as well as Concordia University for the funding opportunities which allowed me to devote the necessary time to my work.

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## Introduction

19. And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.

(Wittgenstein 1958, 11e)

I have chosen to begin my Doctoral dissertation under the auspices of the above quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein, as I strongly believe that my work constitutes merely the addition of my voice to an ongoing conversation within a pre-existing form of life. As such, I contend that it is imperative that I position my contribution within the body of western moral philosophy according to the framework of the existent tenor of the discourse. Wittgenstein's statement is central to this situating task. Over the course of my studies I have become a firm proponent of a Wittgensteinian understanding of language. While Wittgenstein wisely refrained from the attempt to devise a systematic theory of language, he did advance some profoundly interesting insights regarding the character of languages as heterogeneous, composed of metaphor and analogy, and grammatically particular to the form of life within which they are comprehensible. I have endeavoured to use these critical insights to shape my study of moral discourse as it has variously been expressed in what is historically and culturally understood as western philosophy.

I am keenly aware that my entry into the scholarly discourse surrounding moral and ethical concerns in the west signals my taking up the mantle of a participant in the language game apropos to this field. I fully acknowledge my own embeddedness in this discourse, and thus make no claim to occupying a disengaged, or meta, position empowering me to comment upon the subject from a theoretical crow's nest. In doing philosophy one invents a "being" capable of asking specific questions; a notion I have borrowed from Martin Heidegger (Heidegger 2010, 6). For the purposes of writing this



dissertation I have invented a persona uniquely interested in the subject at hand; carrying out investigations seemingly oblivious to all other concerns or interests. In undertaking this project I am engaging in a specialized discourse concerning the study of moral language. Commensurately, I am also a moral subject enmeshed in the pursuit of a good life. I strongly believe that it is critically important that I acknowledge that I occupy a variety of other roles in different forms of life which simultaneously complement, clash with, or proceed entirely indifferent to, my scholarly role.

The temptation to assume a totalizing voice when engaged in philosophical work is, in my experience, very strong. The chief symptom of succumbing to this totalizing voice is evinced by an attitude of disengagement evoked by authors who write as though they were capable of occupying a position regarding their subject from an objective remove. This position, so penetratingly described by Thomas Nagel in his work *The View from Nowhere*, is compounded by a teleological desire to impose a reductive thesis, in a unilateral fashion, which effectively discounts the conceptual paradoxes and epistemic gaps one inevitably encounters when theorizing. The narrative structure attached to the normative dissertation template in the west is, I contend, rife with temptations to assuming a totalizing voice. This is illustrated in the foreword to the “Thesis Preparation and Thesis Examination Regulations”, published by the School of Graduate Studies on Concordia University’s website (effective as of October, 2011), wherein it is stated that “A thesis is the final report on a comprehensive research program that meets accepted scholarly criteria and is of a cohesive, unitary character... The actual style and format of a thesis are of utmost importance. It should be clear, concise and systematic” (<http://graduatestudies.concordia.ca/documents/publications/graduatehandbooks/thesispreparationguide.pdf>).

The consequence of desiring to adhere to these institutionalized standards of practice is that a doctoral candidate may feel the need to answer all questions in a definitive fashion. This totalizing impulse is re-enforced by established academics who prescribe homogeneous formulas for successful dissertation writing, such as that written by Tara Brabazon, a professor of media studies at Brighton University, who in the January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010 edition of *The Times Higher Education* wrote an article entitled “How Not To Write a PhD Thesis”, wherein under tip number three she advises,

The way to relax an examiner is to feature a sentence in the first paragraph of a PhD abstract that begins: “My original contribution to knowledge is...” If students cannot compress their argument and research findings into a single statement, then it can signify flabbiness in their method, theory or structure. It is an awful moment for examiners when they – desperately – try to find an original contribution to knowledge through a shapeless methods chapter or loose literature review. If examiners cannot pinpoint the original contribution, they have no choice but to award the script an MPhil.

The key is to make it easy for examiners. In the second sentence of the abstract, ensure that an original contribution is nailed to the page. Then we can relax and look for the scaffolding and verification of this statement.  
(<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=410208>)

The result of such a doctrinaire approach is often something more akin to ideology than theory. Instead of a probing exploration of a given subject, attended to by tentative arguments, the audience is often presented with a monolithic account which seeks to suppress any and all incongruity. To accept such a linear and parochial worldview would entail a sort of pathological denial of the pluralistic and heterogeneous character of lived experience. I assert that this problem needs to be brought out and acknowledged as the first step in resisting the urge to write in a totalizing voice. My concerns here have largely to do with style. However, I also believe that attending to the multiplicity of

discursive selves germane to living as we do in a variety of voices, opens up new perspectives on phenomenology which are central to my project.

To pretend that a comprehensive theory of moral language represents an achievable end for philosophy would entail a maniacal enforcement of grammatical rules running roughshod over the exigencies and vagaries of everyday practice and experience. Evidence of such an absolutist epistemological enterprise is readily apparent in the legacy of the Positivist movement of the Nineteenth century, and the abiding temptation in contemporary philosophy toward objective knowledge claims. Hence, in a pre-emptive gesture surrendering the will to power inherent in totalizing theories, I renounce any claim to comprehensiveness in my study, and I openly avow the highly particular, perhaps even myopic, approach to the subject at hand.

I owe a debt of gratitude to feminist scholars, social scientists, and artists who have stressed the necessity of acknowledging one's socio-historical embeddedness when engaged in research and writing. However, the concept of embeddedness which I wish to adhere to in this dissertation also includes phenomenological embeddedness. Christina Howells offers an excellent analysis of what this intuitively with regard to our freedom to "make the world", in her essay "Sartre and Levinas". Howells describes how, for both Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, the "other" problematizes the self's "being in the world".

I am born into a world already structured, patterned and possessed by others; my interpretation of it must necessarily take into account the interpretation of others: my freedom to make the world is limited, its application cannot be self-sufficient and arbitrary. (Howells 1988, 92)

If the possibility of devising a comprehensive theory is out of bounds, then what exactly is the job of the moral philosopher? In considering this question I have had to

confront my predilection to write in a postmodernist style which is, sometimes, needlessly opaque. Those thinkers, variously categorized as postmodernists, or neo-Nietzscheans, have been called out by their critics, including Charles Taylor, for concealing the values which drive their theories emphasizing difference, heterogeneity and the fragmented character of reality. In an effort to avoid slipping into an obfuscating voice, I will set out in my first chapter my interpretation of what ought to be the job of philosophy. My argument will revolve around both Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of descriptive philosophy, and Emmanuel Levinas' notion of philosophy as unsaying the said. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate what I intend to accomplish in departing from the normative dialectical format of thesis statement, supporting argument, and conclusion.

I feel it is imperative to begin my dissertation by confronting the reader with the idea that “126. Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us” (Wittgenstein 1958, 55e). As such, I argue that philosophers need to avail themselves of the myriad different vocabularies which are already before us, and engage with them to enrich the rather narrow philosophical discourse dealing with descriptions of the good life in the west.

As a philosopher in the western tradition my interest in the good life can be described as, at best, predictable, and as, at worst, derivative. Nevertheless, I am compelled to re-visit the well-trod ground of this philosophical investigation. Countless philosophers, theologians and artists have proffered guides to, or critiques of, the good life. Their answers have varied from school to school, and era to era, depending upon

which interests are given priority, i.e. political, religious, epicurean, etc. Despite the plethora of creeds concerning the good, I remain, like many, unsatisfied and driven to investigate the meanings evoked in this slippery category. Thus, it is upon the enduring trope of the good that the crux of my dissertation revolves.

In his seminal work, *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor eloquently draws the distinction between a utilitarian concept of what it is right to do, and a more substantive consideration of what it is good to be (Taylor 1989b, 3). My own studies and writing have been considerably influenced by this short dialectic. In the first part of *Sources*, entitled “Identity and the Good”, Taylor exposed a great many faults in the procedural and utilitarian conceptual models which dominate modern moral philosophy in the west. I owe a great debt to Charles Taylor’s critique of western moral thought. Taylor’s lucid and often compelling arguments concerning “strong evaluation” and “articulacy” (terms I will explore at length in subsequent chapters) made tangible the possibility of thinking and speaking about the good in a more nuanced fashion. The moral vocabulary brought out by Taylor in *Sources* resonates strongly with lived experience. I believe that Taylor’s descriptions invigorate the discourse concerning moral philosophy in the modern west. His is a moral vocabulary which gives heft to the notion of a relationship between the idea of the self, and the idea of the good.

I have a great respect for the breadth of Taylor’s philosophical understanding, and an abiding conviction in the validity of many of his arguments. Thus, I proceed with a keen sense of my own presumptuousness upon a critical investigation of his moral thought; an investigation which involves a considerable critique of Taylor’s conclusions. While I uphold much of Taylor’s phenomenological insights, I am compelled by the

pluralistic and discontinuous character of languages, and related forms of life, to ask probing questions focusing upon Taylor's lack of attention to the heterogeneity of the myriad language games within which we live our lives. Further, I am disquieted by the systematic tone which underlies the presentation of his moral theory in "Identity and the Good".

In an effort to avoid the old logocentric traps which I will argue ensnared Taylor in his own theoretical project, I will here lay out a *genre* of negative thesis. More plainly, I will explain what it is that I do not set out to accomplish in writing this dissertation. I do not intend my work to be read as a unified, closed, or comprehensive theory. Furthermore, I reject the notion that one is capable of an intellectual contribution outside of our profoundly interrelated discursive traditions. Our scholarly traditions in the west necessarily involve years of studying the work and thought of others in what might be described as a hermeneutic chain. It is dishonest to lay claim to any theoretical contribution outside of this chain.

As scholars we think, read, and write in a genealogical tradition. At the low end of the tradition we are merely apprentices, learning our trade through rough mimesis. At the high end of the tradition we may produce something genuinely creative, perhaps even something new. Nevertheless, even the new must be acknowledged as being always already rooted in older sources. The longing after objectivity is a dangerous delusion of the will to power, reflecting the desire to rise above the fray of our embedded experience. It is a delusion which leads us to the denial of the others who give us our intellect, and a glorification of the hero myth at the heart of much of our modern malaise (to turn a phrase of Taylor's). Here, I affirm a conviction that all theory is limited, fragmented,

incomplete and open. I argue that these qualities constitute the true strength and value of theory as a dynamic medium. It is the gaps and *faux plat* in theory that leave openings for questioning. This fluidity allows others to build upon what little insights one's tentative interpretation of previous works might contribute to an ongoing and ever changing descriptive discourse.

My decision to depart from the normative archetype of a dissertation in the west makes me acutely aware that I must meticulously explain what it is that I do, intend to do. I believe that my project can best be understood as descriptive. As a philosopher I take seriously the idea, once again articulated by Wittgenstein, that the job of philosophy is descriptive, "124. Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is" (Wittgenstein 1958, 55e). It is in this spirit that I tender my dissertation as a descriptive essay investigating the concept of agency, authenticity and accountability, in contemporary western moral discourse. I harbor no illusions of originality, nor do I seek after hidden meaning. I am merely describing what I apprehend to be a potentially helpful framework for furthering the boundaries of the contemporary discourse concerning our understandings of moral agency.

Although I strongly believe that philosophy, like all human enterprise, is a communal activity, I also acknowledge that innovations are indeed possible. The innovations in the descriptive capacity of discourse help us to re-think our normative understandings *vis à vis* our "being in the world". Consequently, I hope that my own descriptive essay may enrich our sometimes narrow western moral vocabulary through critical interrogation and a re-visioning of the moral dimension of being. The iconoclastic

American literary critic Harold Bloom asserted that, “What ought to be seen more clearly is that revisionism is an energizer even when it works through loss” (Bloom 1982, 50). What underlies Bloom’s sentiment is the sense that revision, which necessarily relies upon description and interpretation, involves struggle.

Asking critical questions and working out more critical descriptions involves the agonistic struggle with one’s own prejudices, misconceptions, and romanticized ideals. Moreover, the dynamic character of interpretive re-visioning demands a vigilance against the positivistic chimeras of modern western thought conjured up to sate the appetite of philosophers for empirical legitimacy through reifying epistemologies. The incentive for undertaking the struggle of interpretative re-visioning is the invigoration derived from placing a given subject in a different descriptive light. It is in this vein that I will attempt to shine a light on a small, but important feature, in Charles Taylor’s moral theory.

That which I seek to bring to light and revise, or better, to re-imagine, in Taylor’s philosophy is his concept of the “best account principle”, (a concept I will analyse in detail in chapter two). I do believe, however, that it is important to inform the reader in advance of the reasons underlying my immodest re-imagining of Taylor’s “best account principle”. It will suffice to state, for introductory purposes, that I consider Taylor’s description of the concept of the “best account principle” to exhibit traits of narcissistic<sup>1</sup> self-concern. Taylor advances a theory arguing for the possibility of developing toward an ever more full, dignified and authentic sense of self. Although Taylor concedes that

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor invokes Christopher Lasch’s book *The Culture of Narcissism* for framing the term narcissism in his discussion of the “contemporary ideal of authenticity” (Taylor 1991b, 14-16). In applying the term narcissistic to Taylor’s model of the self I am suggesting that it exhibits an excessive self-concern. I would not, however, go so far as to link my use to that of the pathological condition discussed by Lasch in his work (Lasch 1979, 239).



self-realization is an always ongoing project, it is clear that he envisions the ideal, fully developed self as a being capable of exercising a *genre* of intentionality rooted in an opaque sense of phenomenological intuition. This allows the agent to discover what Taylor apprehends to be the sources of their own moral identity, made intelligible through a Kantian inspired transcendental<sup>2</sup> “self-reading”, and disclose these sources in an act of articulation. Articulation is a crucial element in Taylor’s moral theory as it constitutes the conduit for agents’ expressions of their visions of the good. This in turn allows them to “make sense of their lives”. Taylor lays this out in his description of the “best account principle”.

The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense is trumps. Let me call this the B.A. principle. (Taylor 1989b, 58)

In light of my reservations concerning the tenor of Taylor’s theory, the question must be asked; why bother with Taylor’s “best account principle” at all? My answer is that I continue to find it a valuable concept for exploring moral discourse. In re-imagining the “best account principle”, I first intend to address, what I consider, the need for a more substantive dimension to the notion of embodiment with regard to moral agency. In the fourth chapter I will expand Taylor’s extremely limited, Merleau-Pontyan influenced model of embodiment, to include attention to features such as gender and assumptions regarding “normative” cognitive function. Embodiment will act as the vanguard in my critique of Taylor’s homogeneous portrayal of moral agency in *Sources*.

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed consideration of Taylor’s use of transcendental will be taken up in chapter 5.

Equipped with this thickened portrait of embodied agency, I will, in the fifth chapter, begin an interpretation of the idea of a “best account” read through Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics. This critical hermeneutic will reverse the flow of the moral account from proclamation to response; a giving of account to others rather than an accounting for one’s vision of the good. The character of my proposed project requires that I describe what I mean by discourse. It is important to note that, although I use both the terms discourse and language throughout my proposal, these terms are not interchangeable. I contend that discourse can be understood as a catchall heading for the myriad manifestations of interrelatedness in the west. Thus, it might include statements and claims, assertions, tentative agreements, discord, dissensus, compromise, questions, critique; or indeed phenomena such as representation, movement, ritual, and architecture. It is neither a tidy category, nor a uniform one.

My investigation pertains to the character and tenor of contemporary moral discourse in the west. Discourses are composed of languages. Languages are constituted by a variety of grammatical tenses, and commensurate vocabularies, particular to the forms of life within which they are comprehensible; their boundaries are porous, yet resist attempts at reductionism. Moral discourse is presented herein, under a Wittgensteinian understanding, as a heading for a plurality of different, inter-related languages. What these languages have in common is their various attempts to advance descriptions of the good life. The idea of heterogeneous discourse usurps the ideal of systemacy based on the lived experience of changes, paradoxes, and innovations in languages. Further, as languages are intricately intertwined with particular forms of life,

linguistic changes must be understood as occurring in tandem with transformations in the forms of life with which they are bound up.

In this dissertation I will explore the possibility of thinking seriously about a particular *genre* of moral vocabulary largely marginalized in contemporary western philosophy. My investigation focuses upon tropes of accountability and responsibility which share a religious etymology in the west. Building upon the Levinasian inspired re-imagining of Taylor's "best account principle" I will explore how the idea of the good as a weight changes the notion of what it means to give a "best account". To accomplish this will entail a recasting of articulation as no longer expressive of self-regarded authenticity, but rather of embodied accountability. The first step here requires abandoning the quest for increasingly authentic accounts of the self, focused on the dignity of living up to one's vision of a worthwhile life.

I argue that in place of this self-concern we must take up the weight of accountability to others, wherein we strive to articulate an ethos of responsibility and justice. This re-visioning/re-imagining of the "best account" renders it a forever unsatisfactory, and thus, unceasing obligation to respond to others. I will describe how this sense of accountability may be understood as an aspect of embodiment. The focus upon embodiment is crucial to my task of drawing the "best account" out of a self-interested monologue concerning authenticity. In the trope of embodied accountability the moral agent is confronted with the others who are always, already present. My description of the "best account" exteriorizes the account as a response. This movement is in clear opposition to what I contend is Taylor's original construal of the "best

account” as a self-declarative act which, consciously or not, implies a transitional epistemic gain on behalf of a self-reading and self-realizing, moral agent.

In making my case for a re-imagined “best account” I freely admit to the use of rhetoric in my arguments. I do not aspire to objectivity or disinterestedness. If I fly any flag over this work let it be the flag of the Sophists, whose memory has been so maligned by the impulse in modern philosophy seeking to legitimate power and authority under the artifice of natural law and objective reason. The purpose of a philosophical argument is to persuade one’s audience toward accepting a particular description of a given subject. If nothing else, this work constitutes an active and impassioned attempt to win my readers over to a limited and fragmentary description of moral agency as being continuously constructed through language.

I am advocating for a vocabulary of accountability framed by metaphors and tropes of anarchic responsibility derived from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Although these tropes share a definite affinity with what are deemed religious languages in the west, they are not to be understood here as dogmatic. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of receiving terms from different vocabularies as metaphors native to particular descriptive languages. I contend that descriptive languages rooted in religious tropes are worth serious consideration given their ability to present responsibility in a fashion which is critical of egoism. I will lean heavily upon a variety of different languages to describe how my re-imagining of the “best account” might provide a conduit for an engagement in moral discourse oriented toward a vision of moral agency, defined by accountability, rather than authenticity.

*Contra* Taylor, my portrait of the moral agent is of a subject made unique, not through their allegiance to private hypergoods, but rather as a consequence of their particular indebtedness to others. This model of the “best account” acknowledges first and foremost the position of moral agents as thrown onto the “ontological plane”, and the limits that said throwness places upon their will and freedom. From this understanding I will extrapolate how every act of account is an attempt to respond, while, paradoxically, also a move to reify through the inevitable drive of thematization. I will conclude my dissertation with a brief consideration of how different languages may be integrated into non-exclusive descriptions of moral agency. This brief exercise will suggest future directions in moral philosophy and language theory which I intend to pursue using my dissertation as a base.

My project calls into question the idea that the fullness of moral agency is measureable against one understanding their life to be authentic, and dignified; in tune with their vision of the good. In place of this, I tender the notion of moral agency as rooted in embodied accountability, wherein expressing one’s responsibility to others takes precedence over one’s concern for authenticity and dignity. In this respect, I will be employing aspects of Charles Taylor’s theory in a fashion which I do not believe would beget his blessing. Mine is not the story of the making of the self. It is, rather, an indictment of the self on the grounds of accountability.

## Chapter One

### On Language & Philosophy

It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to *possess itself* by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth. (Levinas 1974, 99)

The passage quoted above appears in the first few lines of Emmanuel Levinas' seminal work, *Otherwise than Being*, serving to set the tone for his chapter on substitution. In a similar vein, I wish to employ this penetrating and provocative description of the totalizing insularity of modern epistemologies to establish the tenor of this chapter on language and philosophy. In this chapter I will explore a particular conceptual understanding of language, along with a consideration of what I believe the job of philosophy entails. Levinas' observation offers what I contend to be a keen portrayal of the habits of certain strains of post-enlightenment philosophy in the west. The circular sense of movement evoked by Levinas sums up the method by which some philosophers in the west engage in a dialectic of intellectual possession.

The philosophical camps I have in mind here are those which Taylor categorizes under the general heading of "philosophical naturalism" (Taylor 1989b, 79), and which embrace methodological proceduralism and philosophical empiricism. The knowledge claims articulated by these "naturalist" philosophers entails a *genre* of nominalism, wherein meaning is bound up in a strict relationship constructed between the ideality of a concept and its supposed concreteness, or particularity.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that the pursuit of hard and fast naturalistic methodologies for reasoning by the lineage of modern philosophers

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis H. Wrong offers an insightful consideration of the role of nominalism in contemporary western thought in his book *The Persistence of the Particular* (2005) Transaction Publishers.

in the west which stretches from David Hume to W.V. Quine<sup>4</sup> and beyond, derives from a desire to legitimate philosophy in an age where a certain view of scientific empiricism has personified the measure of validity. It is my conviction that one of the great weaknesses of modern, western philosophical naturalism consists in the totalistic character of its discourse. The seed of this totalizing discourse was sown by Plato, and flourished throughout the west of Descartes, Locke, Hegel, Kant, *et al.* in what might best be described as an uneasy marriage between humanism and empiricism. The consequence of this union is a *genre* of anthropocentric idealism wherein thought is made fact, and meanings are reified within structured epistemologies.

Expanding upon Taylor's usage, I suggest that naturalist philosophers might be described as those who seek to establish an objective presence in the world, from which they can document relationships of meaning between events and terminology, and devise rational procedures for mapping ontological terrain. In short, naturalist philosophers are in the business of crafting thematizations of the world which they offer up as independent facts.

This is not a vision of philosophy I share. Rather, I have been strongly influenced by the description of the work appropriate to philosophy articulated by a disparate chorus of dissenting voices in the west. Although I would never attempt to squeeze these philosophers into a "school" of thought, I have recognized, like others before me, points of contact between thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Jane Flax, *et al.* What I feel these thinkers share is a concept of philosophical investigations as limited, embodied, and descriptive practices. To varying

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<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Fogelin provides an excellent analysis of Quine's project, and his relationship to the work of David Hume, in his essay "Aspects of Quine's Naturalized Epistemology", pgs. 19-46 in *The Cambridge Companion to Quine*, ed. Roger F. Gibson Jr. 2004. Cambridge University Press.

degrees, these thinkers deviate from the normative practice of naturalist philosophers who lay out comprehensive ontological models underwritten by empirical claims. *Contra* the univalent structure germane to naturalist theories, these thinkers place an abiding emphasis upon dynamism and difference in their works. Their works express multivalent concepts of languages, and careful attention to the complicated and ephemeral portrayal of agency.

I contend that two of the most eloquent challenges to the status quo in western philosophy are found in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Emmanuel Levinas. Both of these philosophers advocate for a critical hermeneutic approach in philosophy, wherein all descriptions remain contestable, and truth eludes all attempts at possession. In the course of this chapter I will explore both Wittgenstein's and Levinas' concepts of language, and subsequent descriptions of agents in the world. I will also expand upon the ways in which their respective *oeuvres* have influenced my own sense of what constitutes the proper work of philosophy, and the consequences such a vision involves for the philosophers who would accept it.

Before embarking upon this exploration however, I must address the matter of definitions. In my examination of Wittgenstein's investigation into language and philosophy, I will employ various terms whose precise definitions are matters of great contention amongst philosophers. As I will make clear in my review of Wittgenstein's work, I reject the possibility of any precise definition of any term, so long as precision is grasped as constituting an ultimate/absolute definition. However, for the purposes of clarity, I will lay out the tenor of the definitions of certain terms as found in scholarly sources along with my own limited commentary.



## On Language

Language is a term and concept central to the work at hand. However, language can be read in myriad ways, with various conflicting meanings. This ambiguity is immediately encountered in even the most cursory review of the definitions found under the category of language in dictionaries and encyclopedias of philosophy. The print edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in 1998 contains a variety of entries related to language (from the “Ancient Philosophy of Language”, to “Language and Gender”, to the “Innateness of Language”, and so on) spanning an impressive sixty-three pages. Read any two of the entries found within side by side, and one inevitably confronts some disharmonious elements. Indeed, disparate ideas concerning language are to be found under the same heading. Take, for example, the outline of the content provided in the first part of the entry for “Language and Gender”.

Language-gender debates, however, include participants with different conceptions both of language and of gender. This section touches on three recent kinds of work: the Anglo-American empirically oriented tradition, psychoanalytic theorizing from French philosophers and linguists, and work on discourse and gender construction from feminist philosophers and other theorists in literary and cultural studies. (Craig 1998, 362)

This brief snippet evinces the laudable effort which those who write and edit philosophical reference books expend in their attempt to include as many views as possible on a given subject. The passage also illustrates how inter-mural disputes within a given field (in this case that of gender and language theories) evinces the plurality of possible descriptions which may be used to frame a given phenomenon within an overarching language game. Those in search of some definite designation for the content of the term language would be sorely disappointed by the descriptions assembled by the Routledge team. Edward Craig, the editor of the Routledge edition, assigned a

considerable space to the plethora of philosophical approaches to the concept of language, yet provided no entry for the term language unaccompanied by a specific philosophical sub-category. In contrast, Ted Honderich, the editor of the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, devoted a comparatively measly eight pages to the subject of language, but did venture to provide an entry for Language *tout court*. Unhappily for those with structuralist sympathies, the entry for language in the Oxford resource can best be described as a series of questions pertaining to the nature of the subject at hand. The author of the entry, Professor Simon Blackburn, advances a series of critical and enlivening questions regarding the contours of language. The effect of this open format upon the reader is to spur a speculative attitude which complements the spirit in which Wittgenstein pursued his own investigations of language.

The conceptual difficulties in thinking about language become vivid when we consider marginal and unusual candidates. Are the signaling systems of animals properly regarded as languages? If a chimpanzee can associate sounds with things, and put sounds together in simple ways, is this acquiring the essence of linguistic behavior? Is a computer language a kind of language? Does it make sense to posit a 'language of thought' or background language, like the machine code of a computer, whereby human beings processes [sic] their first natural language? And is there a language of music, or art, or clothes? These questions are not so much troublesome in themselves, since we might just posit a criterion that marginal cases do or do not meet. The problem is that we cannot discern a principle. We are not sure what status any definition or criterion of linguistic behaviour could deserve. (Honderich 1995, 454)

The problem of distilling an essential definition for the amorphous term language is troublesome for those in the naturalist lineage of modern philosophy. We might ask, in an admittedly rhetorical manner, how badly some philosophers would like to announce that they had "sequenced the gene" of language. That is, determined a comprehensive model of what language is, and does. However, the nuance and abstruseness native to the term language renders the possibility of such a model fantastic. What is more, the range

of meanings expressed by the term language is extended, as I will demonstrate in my review of Wittgenstein's observations, to all the signifiers at play in language games.

Wittgenstein asserted that meaning is largely determined through "its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, 25e). Since usage of terms and attendant meanings shift from language game to language game, the ideal of a static, systematic and foundational dialectic between sign and signified pursued by modern theorists from Ferdinand de Saussure to Noam Chomsky, is destabilized. The broad range of interpretations of what we are talking about when we talk about language render a consensus view not only impossible, but undesirable. For, to choose one definition of language as superior to all others would entail an arbitrary marginalization of the wealth of different perspectives on the subject, and the limitation of inter-disciplinary discourse which animates the drive of speculative thought. Here I pose the question, why even attempt to establish one definition of language as tops? A possible response to this question rests in the prospect of power which accompanies the institution of a given theoretical perspective as authoritative. This brings us to the second term I would like to elucidate, epistemology.

### On Epistemology

It might be said by some that philosophers are in the business of knowing things. As in the world of commerce, an underlying force in western philosophical practice (which is primarily a creature of the academy) is the increase of market share. Currently, the main markets for working philosophers in the west are universities. The currency in these markets is comprised of research funding, i.e. grants, fellowships, endowed chairs, etc. As is the case in all markets, there is a limited pool of funds available and thus, philosophers must compete with one another to prove the worth of their ideas over and

against the ideas of their colleagues. One way of gaining advantage in this market is to proffer your theory as representing the definitive methodological approach toward a given subject. All theories of knowledge might be described as epistemological following the definition of epistemology found in the charmingly concise *Philosopher's Dictionary*.

Theory of knowledge: one of the main branches of philosophy. Among the central questions studied here are: What is the difference between knowledge and mere belief? Is all (or any) knowledge based on sense perception? How, in general, are our knowledge claims justified? (Martin 2002, 106)

The inquiring tone of this entry belies the danger which lurks in this “main” branch of philosophy. The threat does not reside in asking questions such as “What is the difference between knowledge and mere belief?” The peril lies in how one might answer the question. Presenting definitive answers to epistemological speculation represents a menace to philosophical investigation because they are constructed as comprehensive. The veneer of totality functions as a defensive measure meant to repel critique. The dealing in what Jean-Francois Lyotard dubbed metanarratives<sup>5</sup> is conspicuously detailed in the careful inventory of competing definitions listed under the entry for epistemology in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Under the heading epistemology the author of the entry, Peter D. Klein, reviews the competing theories of knowledge which enjoy the most currency in contemporary western philosophy. Helpfully enumerated for the reader are, “1 The normative answers: foundationalism and coherentism”, “2 The naturalistic answers: causes of belief”, “3 Scepticism”, and “4 Recent developments in epistemology” which includes “Virtue epistemology”, “Cognitive pluralism”, and “Feminist epistemology” (Craig 1998, 362-365).

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<sup>5</sup> For a full treatment of the concept of “metanarratives” or “grand narratives”, see Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. (1984) University of Minnesota Press.

Each of the epistemological models summarized in the Routledge entry express different features of our interpretive responses to the character of the experience of what we dub knowledge. However, to build a truly rich vocabulary for discussing our experiences we must resist the temptation of an orthodox approach to epistemology. Instead, we must remain open to all of the different responses to what we deem epistemological questions. Such an intellectually exposed stance will allow us to engage with a veritable omnibus of worthwhile observations regarding the character of experiences derived from dissimilar sources. Commensurately, we must acknowledge and respect the tension inherent in languages evincing vocabularies capable of expressing such contrasting approaches to experience as empiricism, pragmatism, skepticism, and pluralism. This is sure to frustrate speakers, as they continually run up against paradoxes and gaps in coherency. However, these *aporia* constitute the strengths of a re-visioned philosophical vocabulary. It is not my aim to do away with the term epistemology, only to imagine it in a pluralistic context.

In languages divested of unicity, one would be able to express contextually appropriate observations and descriptions regarding different epistemological experiences without indulging in hegemonic taxonomies. Thus, a feminist critique of paternalistic knowledge claims invoked as guarantors of discriminatory power structures could work alongside a coherence model which uses an arithmetic of complementarity to establish patterns of coherency amongst descriptions. No single approach would claim to be absolute, or appropriate to all fields of inquiry. Neither would any one description or thematization be accorded final say. Rather, the babel of theoretical tongues would provide the fuel for unending discourses occupied with myriad interpretations of

knowledge experiences in different contexts. Philosophers in the west have, now for several centuries, chased after or rebelled against the prospect of a fully rationalistic world view. The time is nigh that this struggle be abandoned.

I argue that the aspiration of naturalist philosophers, in the post-Enlightenment west, to replace the hegemony of superstition with a dominion governed by empirical reasoning accomplishes little more than dressing the emperor in new clothes. Even critiques of the naturalist enterprise by various counter-movements such as that of the post-structuralists have indulged in excessive condemnations of all things rational. The shift from a dogmatic religious discourse in the west, to an episteme governed by rational principles, to a wholesale indictment of the Enlightenment, merely changes the tone of totalization.

### On Wittgenstein

In opposition to this confusion of theories with Truth, Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed a scheme whereby meanings are maintained as heterogeneous, and susceptible to changes effected by the contexts of various forms of life, and moves in associated language games. Wittgenstein's ideas offer relief from the nominalism practiced by naturalists, which suffocates difference through the imposition of static and univalent categories of meaning. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein urged philosophers to acknowledge the similarities which link categories of meaning, while commensurately respecting the differences between their specific and varying uses. Wittgenstein famously likened this relationship to family resemblance, wherein distinctive features may be shared across generations of kin, yet no one feature could be singled out and assigned as common to all. The same scheme can be applied to language. Our categories and titles

may help us to group together descriptions of phenomena which exhibit certain affinities. However, we can in no way purport to distill any of these traits to a common, universal, or pure essence, expressed free of the vagaries inherent in our interpretations.

Wittgenstein summed up this argument in the following rebuke.

66. don't think, but look! — Look, for example, at board-games, with their various affinities. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear... And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way, can see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the upshot of these considerations is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; similarities in the large and the small. (Wittgenstein 1958, 36e)

It is through attentiveness to these similarities that we may undertake the descriptive work proper to philosophy, not by essentializing phenomena to the fixed noema of a totalizing intellect, but rather via the descriptive activity of an open ended hermeneutic. A hermeneutic which chips away at the veneer of ideality, and unleashes a plurality of meaning conveyed by a given term and the wealth that such heterogeneity represents for broadening discourse.

65. Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all — but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all “languages”.  
(Wittgenstein 1958, 35e)

I do not read Wittgenstein's embrace of pluralism and ambiguity as taking up an anti-philosophical stance. Rather, I apprehend Wittgenstein as advocating for a philosophy of description wherein comparison and contrast drive discourse.

Wittgenstein's descriptive action challenges the naturalist aspiration to practice philosophy from a neutral and objective position. Such a disengaged position was famously described by Thomas Nagel in his penetrating work *The View from Nowhere*. I

have little doubt that the aspiration to maneuver philosophy into a scientific methodology stems, in large part, from the rise in esteem of the natural sciences over the last two centuries. The quest to maintain the prestige of philosophy in an age which often confuses utility with authority is quite understandable. It is my belief that the increasing emphasis on objective, disengaged reason in philosophical naturalism is rooted in a desire to cement the legitimacy of philosophy as a companion to the natural sciences.<sup>6</sup> In this crusade for legitimacy, questions and descriptions have taken a back seat to systems and proofs.

Wittgenstein's observations regarding the ways in which we are embedded in a variety of different forms of life presents an obstacle for those philosophers in search of "a view from nowhere", as we always find that we are already somewhere. Further, Wittgenstein describes how we rely upon languages particular to our different life activities to make sense of these different spheres of experience. There are two features of Wittgenstein's model of language games which are important to elucidate for the purposes of the work at hand. The first of these is the interrelated/dependent position in which language games place us. Here, the salient point is that we learn the grammatical rules specific to the use of different language activities from others. For instance, when one enters the study of philosophy one does not do so fully equipped with a philosophical vocabulary, and a foreknowledge of its terms of use. Consequently, from the outset we, as agents, are inextricably entwined with others upon whom we rely for both initiation and engagement. Wittgenstein outlined this reality in his investigation of the concept of private languages. Wherein, he questioned the currency of any epistemological

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<sup>6</sup> For a current example of this drive to align philosophy more closely with science, indeed as a science, please see Colin McGinn, "Philosophy by Another Name", *The New York Times*, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, The Opinion Pages, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/04/philosophy-by-another-name/>



conclusions arrived at via a supposedly disengaged perspective. Wittgenstein parodies the incoherence of a private form of language, one which would presume to eschew inter-relation, in his example concerning one's remarking upon the blue of the sky.

275. Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself, "How blue the sky is!" — When you do it spontaneously — without philosophical purposes — the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to *you*. And you have no qualms about exclaiming thus to another. And if you point at anything as you say the words, it is at the sky. I mean: you don't have the pointing-into-yourself feeling that often accompanies 'naming sensations' when one is thinking about the 'private language'. Nor do you think that really you ought to point at the colour not with your hand, but with your attention. (Consider what "to point at something with one's attention" means.)  
(Wittgenstein 1958, 102e)

Commensurately, it makes no sense to lay claim to divining the essence of a phenomena through a philosophical analysis which depends upon what Wittgenstein so succinctly described as the "pointing-into-yourself feeling". The language of philosophy can lay claim to its own grammatical particularity, like the language of politics, or music, or sport, etc. However, philosophical language cannot lay claim to any special, disengaged prerogative. Philosophical language is governed by the same inter-related conditions as all other language games. Philosophers, like politicians, musicians and athletes, learn the nuances and peculiarities of their vocabulary within a community of discourse. Further, in evincing the embededness of philosophers in language, Wittgenstein also illustrates how philosophical inquiry is inherently limited to the given. Thus, philosophical discourse can only deal in what is already exposed through shared languages.

Under the naturalist paradigm, it is supposed that one might be capable of being present to experience in an objective fashion. The power enshrined in this *genre* of meta-perspective affords a capacity to reveal the essential meaning hidden within mundane

phenomena via the exercise of a disengaged analysis. This model of disengaged presence is seriously problematized by the *a priori* collective, and received, character of the languages within which (following Wittgenstein) we express ourselves. Wittgenstein provides a crisp critique of the attempt to divorce thought from language in his statement that, “329. When I think in words, I don’t have ‘meanings’ in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather, language itself is the vehicle of thought” (Wittgenstein 1958, 113e). If we accept Wittgenstein’s assertion, then as philosophers we must surrender any claim to the role of translating thought, and revealing hidden meaning. Thoughts are language all the way down. We live in shared languages wherein everyone initiated has the potential to access the senses conveyed therein. Thus, I argue, there can be no map to a disengaged position within life and language.

This line of thinking resonates with some elements of Heidegger’s notion of *geworfenheit*, or thrownness (Heidegger 2010, 131). I argue that thrownness constitutes an important descriptive metaphor for interpreting the way in which we find ourselves situated in the world as agents. Although I do not share Heidegger’s ultimate conclusions, I do find his concept of finding oneself always, already in the world prior to any reflection or willing gesture to be helpful for focusing on philosophy as an engaged, embodied, and embedded exercise.

I stated above that Wittgenstein’s concept of language games evinced two features which support the struggle to re-cast the job of philosophy. In addition to the manner in which language games compel us to admit our necessarily inter-related position within the life world, language games also unfix meaning from the rigid categories integral to the business of constructing totalizing epistemologies. Wittgenstein

describes how different language games attend different forms of life, and how, although the grammar of one language game may share certain resemblances with others, they are always un-synthesizable. However, at no point does Wittgenstein suggest that one language or form of life exists in isolation from others. Rather, the sense one gets from reading Wittgenstein's observation is of permeability between all forms of life and language, and the dynamic character of the meaning of the terms commensurable within them (Wittgenstein 1958, 35e).

This perspective complicates totalizing epistemologies which depend upon rigid taxonomies to establish their authority. After all, if a certain feature of a procedural method for, say, ethical behavior, is suddenly understood as variable, then the entire structure of the system's imperative onus collapses. Variability is precisely what accompanies Wittgenstein's observation of meanings in languages.

79. And this can be expressed as follows: I use the name "N" without a *fixed* meaning. (But that impairs its use as little as the use of a table is impaired by the fact that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles.) Should it be said that I'm using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense? — Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing how things are. (And when you see that, there will be some things that you won't say.) (Wittgenstein 1958, 42e)

The passage quoted above returns us to the importance of considering our thrownness in the world, and the way that we navigate our forms of life using inherited language and meanings which necessarily "wobble". The activity of philosophy framed in this context is an activity intimately acquainted with variability. The goal of philosophy is here no longer understood as the construction of totalizing epistemologies wherein ambiguity is branded intolerable. Rather, following Wittgenstein, philosophy thrives upon the ebb and flow of languages, and uses the dynamic character of different

meanings to craft myriad descriptions of the phenomena of lived experience accessible to all agents. I do not discern the value of a theory calculated by the degree to which the concepts and arguments advanced in it may be judged to be air tight, free from variability, and revelatory of some profound and hidden essence. I contend that the worth of a philosophical theory is directly tied to the degree to which it is helpful as a descriptive language allowing its users to “cope with conceptual unclarity” (Wittgenstein 1958, 216e, 202).

In this light, philosophy is understood as a descriptive activity, practiced in discursive communities to help elucidate a variety of life experiences. Such a model of philosophy would, I believe, bring into dialogue contrasting descriptions of experience, rendered somewhat more commensurable through the acknowledgement of pervasive difference underlying the terms involved. Under this rubric even idealistic vocabularies are entitled to be party to discussions, as long as no one ideal is advanced as synonymous with an illusory totality. We might even use hierarchical models in this vision of philosophy. However, any hierarchies here would be governed by the principle of pluralism and change which permeates the whole sense of Wittgensteinian language. Thus, hierarchies would be understood as hierarchies of description, always qualified as tentative, and judged more or less helpful for describing the character of an experience.

I share much of Wittgenstein’s vision of the activities appropriate to philosophy. This view has provided some of the basis upon which I demurred from pursuing the normative paradigm of a doctoral dissertation; as articulated in the introduction to this work. Thus, going forward I will be employing a descriptive style which, while advancing arguments, never seeks to culminate in a totalizing *coup de grâce*. My goal

remains to help to clarify the realm of experience we design moral, or ethical, through tentative descriptive interpretations. My descriptions can certainly be apprehended as theoretical. However, they are not intended to be understood as comprehensive. In an effort to further explain this vision of philosophy I will review some of the insights regarding the work of philosophy and the spirit of language presented by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas represents a major figure in this work. In subsequent chapters I will draw heavily upon facets of his philosophy for help in both the critique of Charles Taylor's moral theory, as well as my own attempt to proffer a description of embodied accountability<sup>7</sup>. In this first chapter, however, Levinas' observations serve mainly to elucidate the character of philosophy and language animating my project.

#### On Levinas

In light of my critique of the naturalist aspiration toward disengagement, the question arises as to how we are to make peace with our fate as embedded in a world from which we have no recourse to a disengaged and all-encompassing perspective? I believe that Emmanuel Levinas provides some helpful ideas for grappling with the inherent opacity of human life. Levinas also offers a description of the proper work of philosophy which bolsters that which I have already sketched out by Wittgenstein. With Wittgenstein we examined the notion of philosophy as the activity of devising descriptions of lived experiences. Levinas also apprehended the work of philosophy as a descriptive endeavour. Both Wittgenstein and Levinas offered visions of philosophy as a process whereby descriptions are critically refined. Neither Wittgenstein nor Levinas allowed that philosophers should be accorded some special access to hidden meaning or totalizing metaphysical explanations. Rather, they both insisted that philosophers work

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<sup>7</sup> This term, and the concepts I am using it to represent, will be elaborated upon in the fifth chapter.

with the given phenomena common to normative experience. However, unlike Wittgenstein who left us a series of critical fragments, Levinas crafted a much more expansive descriptive philosophy. The subject of Levinas' work is ethics. A close investigation of Levinas' ideas about the ethical will be taken up in chapter five. However, what is of crucial importance for the task at hand, is an examination of the particular vocabularies which Levinas developed in his tomes *Totality and Infinity*, and *Otherwise than Being*.

The aspects of Levinas' terminology, which I explore here, will certainly serve to elucidate my later discussion regarding ethics. However, this lexicon is also critical for examining the questions concerning the scope of philosophy which form the core of this chapter. I used the term thematization above in reference to a description of experience. Levinas offers a rich conceptual frame for interpreting the ways in which a thematization can be said to function. Commensurately, reading Levinas' description of the process of thematization is of acute importance for fleshing out the tropes he devises with regard to the "saying" and the "said", which is paramount for establishing a purchase upon the notion of philosophy as a strictly descriptive endeavour. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas considers notions of the past, of presence, and of history under the heading "Discourse". Within this section Levinas elucidates some features of the relationship between cognition and experience and how they function in the production of thematizations.

If the object thus refers to the project and labor of the knower, it is because objective cognition is a relation with the being that one always goes beyond and that always is to be interpreted. The "what is it?" approaches "this" qua "that." For to know objectively is to know the historical, the *fact*, the *already happened*, the already passed by. The historical is not defined by the past; both the historical and the past are defined as themes of which one can speak. They are thematized precisely because they no longer speak. The historical is forever absent from its very presence. This means that it disappears behind its manifestations; its

apparition is always superficial and equivocal; its origin, its principle, always elsewhere. It is a phenomenon—a reality without reality.  
(Levinas 1961, 65)

In this passage Levinas presents an argument against the confusion of narratives of experiences with the event of experience, which is always already past. Levinas is not preparing to lay claim to a more perfect epistemological method. Rather, he is sounding a note of caution regarding the tendency to apprehend the “said”, that is the thematization of a that which is “always elsewhere”, with essential meaning/Truth. This perspective calls into question the notion that there exists some avenue toward a *genre* of Platonic presence, wherein one might dig under the “superficial and equivocal” and get at the essential content of an experience. In the passage above, Levinas goes some way toward advancing the disenchantment of the drive toward totalizing epistemologies. Levinas’ description of thematizations exposes some of the assumptions which underlie the idealization of disengaged presence. An idealization exemplified in the *Cogito*. Since the Enlightenment, western philosophers have largely taken recourse to either empiricism or intuition to establish competing epistemologies tied to complimentary models of ontology.<sup>8</sup> Levinas’ description of thematization problematizes both naturalistic and romantic models. As both the naturalists and the romantics lay claims binding knowledge to experience, through what I claim is a *genre* of intentionality.

To help lay out what I intend here by the use of intentionality requires addressing the work of Edmund Husserl. In Husserl’s theory, intentionality is tied to consciousness and allows for the analysis and representation of intentional experience. Dan Zahavi illustrates this aspect of Husserl’s theory in his work *Husserl’s phenomenology*.

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst Cassirer provides an uncommonly good analysis of the genealogy of modern western philosophical thought in his classic work *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln, 1951. Boston: Beacon Press

According to Husserl, one can analyze every intentional experience from three different perspectives. One can focus on the physical process, and analyze the *immanent* (reelle) *content* of the act. One can analyze the meaning of the experience, and thereby investigate its *intentional content*. Finally, one can focus on that which is intended, that is, on the *intentional object* that the act is conscious of (cf. Hua 19/129). I have just mentioned that the intentional object, far from being some mysterious quasi-real entity, is simply identical with the intended object— but what about the intentional content? As already mentioned, the intentionality of consciousness is not caused by an external influence, but is due to internal moments in the experience itself. Briefly put, it is the intentional content that makes consciousness intentional, furnishing the act with its directedness. (Zahavi 2003, 22)

Husserl's notion of intentionality evinces a totalizing relationship between cognition and experience wherein agents are portrayed as present to their experiences (including, I would argue, those involving other agents) and are able to reduce their experiences to objects of intentional, mental representation. *Contra* Husserl, Levinas advanced an asymmetrical theory usurping the internalizing movement of intentionality.

We have begun with the resistance of beings to totalization, with an untolded multiplicity they constitute, the impossibility of their conciliation in the same.

This impossibility of conciliation among beings, this radical heterogeneity, in fact indicates a mode of being produced and an ontology that is not equivalent to panoramic existence and its disclosure. For common sense but also for philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger, panoramic existence and its disclosure are equivalent to the very production of being, since truth or disclosure is at the same time the work or the essential virtue of being, the *Sein* of the *Seiendes* and of every human behavior it would in the last analysis govern... The break-up of totality, the denunciation of the panoramic structure of being, concerns the very existing of being and not the collocation or configuration of entities refractory to the system... One of the principle theses of this work is that the noesis-noema structure is not the primordial structure of intentionality (which is not equivalent to interpreting intentionality as a logical relation or as a causality.)

(Levinas 1961, 294)

In the passage above Levinas begins to re-imagine intentionality. The complexities involved in Levinas' endeavour are legion. However, for the purposes of my immediate argument, it suffices to understand the basic critique which Levinas advanced.



In “Section I: D. Separation and Absoluteness” of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas disrupts the linearity underlying intentionality through a critical consideration of the trope of separation (Levinas 1961, 102-105). Levinas emphasizes the embodied character of the agent and their elemental separation from a heterogeneous exteriority, irreducible to their epistemic representations. Thus, intentionality is overwhelmed by separation and the constitutive power of representation is seriously undermined. Levinas outlines how the philosophical systems which seek a totalized model of ontology are vested in the metaphysics of unity. These discourses attempt, in their various ways, to invest agents with a measure of control grounded in temporal presence, and epistemological systems rooted in intentionality (ibid).

In the wake of studying Levinas’ critique of intentionality I have been forced to confront the manner in which the totalizing drive of this *genre* of thinking has shaped my own philosophical perspective. As a student of philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century I have a healthy suspicion of modern philosophical movements such as structuralism and empiricism. However, I have come to realize that my own perspective is often framed by a linear, teleological conceptual framework. I have even interpreted radically disruptive theories such as deconstructionism according to an idealization of fragmentation. In this respect, it is also apparent that I have taken pluralism and heterogeneity, two of the great watchwords of postmodernism, as evincing an essential content. I have confused themes and thematizations with Reality.

Levinas expends some energy addressing this confusion in his examination of the privileging of speech in western philosophy. Levinas plays out a dialectic juxtaposing speech with vision. In section three of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes the tie that

binds vision to both rationalistic and romantic theories of intuition. Levinas describes how intuition and vision operate in tandem in modern epistemological systems as reifying gaze and synthesizing grasp. This objectifying move allows for the reconciliation of disparate phenomena within a given totalizing world view via the intuitive gaze.

Vision is not a transcendence. It ascribes a signification by the *relation* it makes possible. It opens nothing that, beyond the same, would be absolutely other, that is, in itself. Light conditions the relations between data; it makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face. Intuition, taken in this very general sense, is not opposed to the thought of relations. It is already relationship, since it is vision; it catches sight of the space across which things are transported towards one another. Space, instead of transporting beyond, simply ensures the condition for the *lateral* signification of things within the same.” (Levinas 1961, 191)

In this respect, the project of totalization is accomplished by the capacity of intuition/vision which allows for the reification of experiences into totalized epistemological models. These are the mechanics which Levinas describes as underlying the *Sinngebung* (Levinas 1961, 123), the route by which the knowing agent imbues meaning from their consciousness into the world of objects. In response to the totalizing drive of intuitive epistemologies, Levinas presents a concept of alterity which cripples the power of vision and intuition. The scope of alterity which Levinas introduces is not merely bent on usurping the Hegelian ideal of all-encompassing *Geist*. Rather, Levinas invokes an alterity which renders the trope of separation ingrained in the multiplicity of beings unconditionally based on the “impossibility of their conciliation in the same” (Levinas 1961, 294).

The trope of alterity devised by Levinas is one oriented toward a dimension “otherwise than being”. This alterity evokes a sense of difference which is irreconcilable with the notion of totality. The stark character of Levinas’ alterity trope announces the

impossibility of being present. The description of alterity championed by Levinas is not limited to the hopelessness of objects being retained within a reciprocal epistemological totality. The tropes of separation and alterity also work to problematize agents' objectifications of each other. Indeed, Levinas develops a description of radical difference, and irreconcilable separation, between the I and the Other. This drastic vision of alterity is articulated by Levinas in his assertion that "The ethical, beyond vision and certitude, delineates the structure of exteriority as such. Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (Levinas 1961, 304).

For Levinas, any avenue left open to bridge the separation inherent in being is a capitulation to the *Sinngebung*. Levinas endeavours to block recourse to the *Sinngebung* through an emphasis on language. This is evinced in Levinas' contention that separation is first and foremost exhibited through language. Language, in Levinas' account, exemplifies expression and signification. In language separation is not bridged but rather amplified. Language is the vehicle whereby an(other) signifies in a fashion which preempts the very possibility of the *Sinngebung*. This preemption is made possible as language signals meaning from an(other) source, before meaning can be intuited and shaped through intentionality. In this fashion, Levinasian language usurps totalizing epistemological models through the radical separation intoned in the chasm separating being, and the "otherwise than being". Levinas carefully defines the significance of expression in the section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Ethics and the Face".

This bond between expression and responsibility, this ethical condition or essence of language, this function of language prior to all disclosure of being and its cold splendor, permits us to extract language from subjection to a preexistent thought, where it would have but the servile function of translating that preexistent thought on the outside, or of universalizing its interior movements... Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as

meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane. (Levinas 1961, 200-201)

The question of ethics will be taken up in the proceeding chapters. However, at this juncture, it is important to limit the discussion to the implications that Levinas' assertions hold for the description of language and philosophy. Levinas' critique of intuition and intentionality is significant because it puts into question the scope of what it is possible to know through the myopia inherent in separation. Levinas renders the ideal of a total, unified, "panoramic" epistemology not only absurd, but indeed dangerous. Levinas' arguments make it clear that to achieve such an ideal would necessitate a violent subjugation of difference via the silencing of the expression of the other which presents the only feasible way to ignore separation. In Richard Cohen's forward to Emmanuel Levinas' second masterwork, *Otherwise than Being*, Cohen asserts that while *Totality and Infinity* focused upon "ethical alterity", *Otherwise than Being* is concerned with "ethical subjectivity" (Levinas 1974, xii).

Levinas made it abundantly clear in *Totality and Infinity* that the alterity of the other is unconditional. The extent of the separation between the I and the other is not something that can be described as possessing a quality. Subjectivity, however, is a more intimate trope directly related to the thinking agent. Commensurately, a shift in Levinas' language takes place between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas moves from a speculative discourse describing the "infinity of expression to the inexhaustible response of the self as saying" (Levinas 1974, xiii). The question of language looms large in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas also evinced a strong concern for language in *Totality and Infinity*. However, it is clear that in *Otherwise than Being* he is more urgently occupied with delineating how the language of ontology, thematization,

and being, is influenced by the plane he characterizes as “otherwise” to, and “beyond” being.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas argued that responsibility structures language. However, Levinas remained silent on the subject of how we are able to talk about this relation, “founded” in the ethical dimension which is “otherwise” than being, which one would conclude is beyond our comprehension. How do we talk about the ethical while respecting the impossibility of reducing ethics to knowledge? I believe Levinas provides a possible framework for this difficult endeavour in his elaboration of time and temporalization, wherein he discusses “diachrony”, a concept which is helpful for thinking about philosophy, ethics, subjectivity and language.

In “diachrony” Levinas introduced a trope allowing for an awareness of an “otherwise than being”, without any commensurate claim regarding an essential content. Levinas draws an important distinction between the “otherwise than being”, and the simple negation of “not being”. It is crucial that “otherwise” not be confused with the negation of being, as negation only ever creates an interval which is immediately filled in by being. Levinas lays out this scheme in the first chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, wherein he presents a description of “*l’il y a*” or, the “there is”. Levinas states that “The *there is* fills the void left by the negation of being” (Levinas 1974, 4). This is positively portrayed as the “*conatus* of beings” (ibid).

*Conatus* facilitates a description of the persistence of being upon the “ontological plane” wherein the struggle between egoisms is played out as “each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together” (ibid). This offers a stunning exposition of totality as a strange mode of “togetherness”

founded in the “extreme synchronism of war” (ibid). Levinas’ discussion here establishes the specter of “synchronism”, against which he can play off the concept of “diachrony”. In “synchronism” Levinas finds a trope well suited to the metaphorical structure of the *conatus* which fuels the desire for a totalizing epistemology. The “synchronism of war” even extends into the respite of peace, wherein open conflict is transmuted by “calculation, mediation and politics” into a new form of struggle in the realm of “exchange and commerce” (ibid).

Levinas’ argument focuses upon the trope of “synchrony” in being, where even the negation of being is merely the perpetuation of “essence”. To understand what is “otherwise” than being, yet somehow signified in it, requires the possibility of “diachrony”. “Diachrony” is that which signals “a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization, a transcending diachrony” (Levinas 1974, 9). This “lapse” is signified by a rift which upsets the normative understanding of time, memory and knowledge as components in a reciprocal system making possible the “recuperation of all divergencies, through retention, memory and history... nothing is lost, everything is presented or represented, everything is consigned and lends itself to inscription, or is synthesized or, as Heidegger would say, assembled” (ibid). The diachronic may be described as disrupting intuition and intentionality through loss. Levinas uses the trope of the “diachronic” to signal an “anarchical passed”. The anarchic in Levinas’ theory is understood as transcendent with respect to the present; signaled within the present but not in any way related to the present as an origin, or within the reciprocity of an “ontological relation” (ibid).

Levinas' description of diachrony is central to what he sets out as the task of philosophy. Levinas asserts that "the pre-original element of saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designate it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme." Levinas focuses upon language in *Otherwise than Being* as the vehicle through which the aforementioned betrayal might be "reduced" (Levinas 1974, 7). There is a small but important passage in footnote five of chapter one of *Otherwise than Being* which sheds light on Levinas' discussion of language and philosophy. In it, Levinas describes how "logic interrupted by the structures of what is *beyond being* which show themselves in it does not confer a dialectical structure to philosophical propositions. It is the superlative, more than the negation of categories, which interrupts systems, as though the logical order and the being it succeeds in espousing retained the superlative which exceeds them. In subjectivity the superlative is the exorbitance of a null site" (Levinas 1974, 187).

In this passage Levinas begins to strip away the *façade* of totality which colours the synchronic perspective offered by the vision/intuition model discussed above. Levinas' notion of the "superlative" places limits upon what can be synchronized by vision/intuition. As that which is "otherwise than being", cannot be represented in a "dialectical structure". The "otherwise than being" which Levinas motions toward is at once beyond articulation, yet echoed in accounts nevertheless. The vision/intuition model rejects the possibility of something other than being that is not negation, i.e. not being, which is still a party to the dialectic of being. Levinas' arguments are challenging in part because they hinge upon allusions to that which is "otherwise than being", and so naturally resists any attempt at logical analysis. In Levinas' work philosophy is returned to the scandal of skepticism. Herein lays the challenge for using a Levinasian concept of

language in the practice of philosophy. The crux of the challenge rests in apprehending how a language steeped in thematization, which always threatens to pour over into reification, might still be helpful for describing experiences. In skepticism, Levinas offers us an example of a discourse capable of unsaying itself.

Can this *saying* and this *being unsaid* be assembled, can they be at the same time? In fact to require this simultaneity is already to reduce being's *other* to *being* and *not being*. We must stay with the extreme situation of a diachronic thought. Skepticism, at the dawn of philosophy, set forth and betrayed the diachrony of this very conveying and betraying. To conceive the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as skepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility. If, after the innumerable "irrefutable" refutations which logical thought sets against it, skepticism has the gall to return (and it always returns as philosophy's illegitimate child), it is because in the contradiction which logic sees in it the "at the same time" of the contradictories is missing, because a secret diachrony commands this ambiguous or enigmatic way of speaking, and because in general signification signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence. (Levinas 1974, 7)

Levinas argues strongly in *Totality and Infinity* that the other defies representation. If we accept the premise of ethics as first philosophy then we are compelled to re-imagine the work properly understood as philosophical. The task is no longer to conceive of an object, which would then be represented, synthesized, and synchronized within a totalizing model of epistemology. Rather, Levinas asks that we restrict our articulations to a description of a trace. This requires the development of a vocabulary for describing the trace.<sup>9</sup> In posing the question "Does the beyond being which philosophy states, and states by reason of the very transcendence of the *beyond*, fall unavoidably into the forms of the ancillary statement?" (Levinas 1974, 7) Levinas

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida evinced similar concerns regarding language in his theory of deconstructionism. See Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) John Hopkins University Press.



attaches the trope of transcendence to his theory. Consequently, any consideration of a possible vocabulary for describing the trace necessitates a reflection on transcendence.

Levinas' use of the term transcendence in *Otherwise than Being* does not hue to either a traditionally theological, nor an idealist interpretation. In these classical frameworks transcendence often signifies the human agent as achieving either oneness with a divine, or access to a world consciousness. In both scenarios the agent ascends to a higher state of consciousness. Levinas' notion of transcendence differs from these paradigms. Levinas uses transcendence to allude to the trace of the "beyond" which echoes in the "said". It is the trace of the "beyond" which troubles agents' "psyches".

The said shows, but betrays (shows by betraying) the dieresis, the disorder of the psyche which animates the *consciousness of*, and which, in the philosophical order of the said, is called transcendence. But it is not in the said that the psyche signifies, even though it is manifested there. Signification is the one-for-the-other which characterizes an identity that does not coincide with itself... The psyche or animation is the way a relationship between uneven terms, without any common time, arrives at relationship. Non-objectifiable, non-contemporaneous, it can only signify non-indifference. An animate body or an incarnate identity is the signifyingness of this non-indifference. (Levinas 1974, 70-71)

In this passage Levinas sketches the broad outlines for a philosophical language describing the "relation without relation" between being and the "beyond". As agents, we are irreconcilably separated from any absolute presence to, or totalizing knowledge of, both other beings and the saying which subtends the said. Yet, despite this separation, we can in no way be said to be indifferent toward these unknown others. The condition of non-indifference is central to why I find Levinas' depiction of the job of philosophy so important. Levinas explicitly invokes philosophy as the frame of his inquiry. Further, he grounds philosophy in its primary mode of engagement represented by the simple

“what?”, in the “origin of all thought...[going] back to ontology, to the understanding of the being of entities, the understanding of essence” (Levinas 1974, 24). Yet, the “what?” is articulated by an (animate/incarnated) agent. Based on this model of embodied inquiry I contend that the “what?”, and thus philosophy, are rooted in non-indifference.

One of the dangers represented by naturalist philosophy is that the quest for a disengaged perspective actively resists non-indifference. In Levinas’ philosophy, however, there is no point at which the agent, or their inquiry (the “what?”), is disengaged from being. In Levinas, the activity of philosophy is entrenched in engagement, in the question “what?” Following Levinas, we must accept that philosophy will always remain embedded within being, and that consequently, all philosophical argument represents only the thematization of being. That in asking “what?” we acknowledge that the “silent coming and going from question to response, with which Plato characterized thought, already refers to a plot in which is tied up the node of subjectivity, by the other commanding the same” (Levinas 1974, 25).

Naturalist philosophy is invested in a concept of the manifestation of being which is always a relationship predicated on being present. Subjectivity, in the Levinasian sense, disrupts the ideal of presence through the trope of diachrony, the “otherwise than being”, and the an-archival past which is signified by the metaphor of the trace. Levinas imposes diachrony upon subjectivity. The troubling of the “psyche” which diachrony engenders also conditions the “what?” of philosophy. In this tenor, the “what?” of philosophy begins inquiry with a recognition of the “other in the same” (ibid) Levinas asserts that philosophy, as questioning, evinces how in subjectivity the other “disturbs” the peace of the same, causes a “restlessness”, “an-archival” to consciousness, signified

only by questioning. However, as soon as an answer is constructed the subject is back again dealing in themes wherein “A word is a nomination, as much as a denomination, a consecrating of the “this as this” or a “this as that”...a kerygma at the bottom of a fiat” (Levinas 1974, 36). However, the questioning itself might occasion a lapse in the persistence of being, a hedge against the desire for disengagement.

In asking “what?” the synchronism of thematization is disrupted. Before a suitable theme can be supplied to repair the schism in synchronization, Levinas asserts that, the lapse engendered by questioning “bears witness to an extreme passivity of saying behind the saying that becomes a simple correlative of the said - the passivity of exposure to suffering and trauma, which the present work aims to thematize” (Levinas 1974, 189 ft. note 25).

This passage evinces two critical features of Levinas’ project. The first is that, as a philosopher, Levinas explicitly recognizes his work as thematization. Yet, he still holds out hope that philosophy can somewhat mitigate the necessary corruption and betrayal of the “saying” inscribed in the “said”. Levinas believes philosophy can help in the partial “unsaying of the said” (Levinas 1974, 181); attending to the trace within language while securing against its reification in a totalizing epistemology. This is demonstrated in Levinas’ statement that it is necessary that “the saying call for philosophy in order that the light that occurs not congeal into essence what is beyond essence, and that the hypostasis of an eon not be set up as an idol” (Levinas 1974, 44). Philosophy can accomplish this task through careful attention to diachrony. Thus, preventing the said from synthesizing the echo of the saying into the presence of speech, writing, and the plot of the “fable”.

## Argument

In this chapter I have endeavoured to frame a comparative, and complimentary, discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Emmanuel Levinas' respective descriptions of language, critiques of epistemology, and visions for philosophy. The conclusion of this discussion is not meant to lead to a harmonious synthesis of their observations. Nor, would I deign to claim that mine is a definitive presentation of their respective views of the subjects at hand. Rather, what I seek to tease out of this discussion is a prism through which the reader can approach the philosophical arguments which follow in the proceeding chapters.

From Wittgenstein we have received a vision of languages as grammatically particular to the forms of life within which they are commensurable. Levinas, in turn, has presented us with a theory of language which challenges the monological tenor of totalizing epistemological models. Wittgenstein emphasizes pluralism; Levinas commands our attention toward asymmetry. I contend that both Wittgenstein and Levinas offer examples of limited, revisable, fragmented and particular philosophical vocabularies. At this point it is important to note that neither Wittgenstein nor Levinas perceived their inquiries as leading toward a nihilistic view of philosophy and language; quite the opposite, in fact. Following Levinas and Wittgenstein, I add my voice to the call to abandon the quixotic quest to defeat ambiguity, and thus know the world objectively (to possess it).

In surrendering the aspiration toward total knowledge, western philosophers would effectively liberate themselves from the Sisyphean task of designing elaborate epistemologies which, inevitably, roll back over their architects whenever inevitable

paradoxes are encountered. Languages are composed of metaphors and tropes. We live in languages. The tropes and metaphors which structure our understanding of our different forms of experience are dynamic, and to a greater or lesser extent, opaque. Languages are embedded in the experiences they describe, and thus can never attain to the disengaged presence required to objectively assign essential meanings to experiences as said. To surrender the aspiration toward totalizing epistemologies is to gain the richness of particular, nuanced, and limited descriptive vocabularies. It is to gain access to a whole palette of potentially divergent meanings rather than having to champion one or another ultimate meaning for good and for all. In this respect, I argue that the visions of language and philosophy presented in the works of Levinas and Wittgenstein represent an optimistic and hopeful direction for western philosophy.

The understanding of languages as composed of tropes and metaphors, all the way down, as it were, also affords space for the re-imagination of vocabularies marginalized in western philosophical discourse. One such vocabulary is that of religious languages. I must make it clear that I am in no way arguing for a return (which would be impossible in any case) to some orthodox, pre-Enlightenment dogmatic grammar. Rather, in approaching the understanding of languages as metaphorical, we may avoid the pitfalls of essentialism. This is not to say that for some, perhaps many religious agents, the theistic content in their descriptions of their experiences is suddenly bereft of meaning. Only that said meaning is not an essential content. It is imperative that philosophers recognize that languages are intractably embedded within the particular experiences they seek to describe, while commensurately able to express a plurality of different meanings depending upon the circumstances of their articulation. Under this rubric, religious

languages are strengthened. This strength derives from their being understood as providing a descriptive vocabulary which strongly resonates with the experiences of agents without seeking to lay claim to any expressive exclusivity. The same understanding applies to other forms of life; sciences both natural and social, sports, theater, etc.

As long as no totalizing claim is attached to a particular language we ought to respect its suitability for describing a particular form of life based on its actual usage among agents. It is also important that I address the notion of permeability between different languages which is observed in the use of analogies. This crossing-over of tropes and metaphors is a great resource for philosophy, as philosophical languages thrive on the borrowing of tropes and metaphors from the wide gamut of diverse languages.

#### On Fideism

I am aware that my discussion of the particularity of languages, and my focus on religious languages, hints at what Kai Nielsen and others have coined Wittgensteinian fideism. In anticipation of this critique, I will briefly address Nielsen's concerns. The matter of Wittgensteinian fideism emerged in a 1967 article of the same name written by Nielsen. In the piece Nielsen argued that philosophers of religion have employed Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to perpetuate a fideistic defense of religious belief. Nielsen asserts that when subjected to an analysis within the "overall universe of discourse of which religious discourse is a part, it may still be found that religious discourse, like discourse about fairies, is incoherent" (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 35). Further, Nielsen asserts that only through an artificial "compartmentalization" of what he dubs "God-talk" is religious belief saved from having to provide a critical account of its

content. Nielsen concludes that “*In this way* religious discourse is a kind of protected discourse; it is *sui generis*” (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 56). Hence, the alleged fideism. Nielsen’s essay constituted the opening salvo in a debate which spanned many years and saw the production of much philosophical argument on both sides.

The opposition to Nielsen’s critique was championed by the philosopher of religions D.Z. Phillips. Phillips disputed Nielsen’s argument and advanced a critique of what he claimed formed the assumptions upon which Nielsen’s analysis was predicated. Phillips accused Nielsen of misunderstanding Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language by requiring that “a critical account” be part and parcel of religious discourse. Phillips grounded his charge in Nielsen’s own endorsement of Wittgenstein’s “desire to be open to the conceptual and grammatical variety to be found in our discourse” (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 83). Phillips makes a good case that Wittgensteinian philosophy sets out a task of elucidating human practices through engaged contemplation and the articulation of better descriptions.

In this framework, there is no requirement for discourses to include justification arguments *qua* “critical account”. According to Phillips, Wittgensteinians properly understood, follow Wittgenstein’s claim “that what we need to meet our philosophical puzzlement *already lies before us*. We are not awaiting new information. Nothing is hidden. It is in *that* sense only that philosophy leaves everything where it is” (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 87-88). Commensurately, philosophers of religion who follow this credo are bound to reflect on religious discourse within the parameters of its grammatical particularity. This does not preclude comparison or analogy with other discourse, only that the coherence of the discourse does not depend upon a universally comprehensible

“critical account”/justification. Following Phillips, religious discourse can be critiqued but it cannot be dismissed as incoherent based on the notion of an overarching, universal criteria of coherency. Such a universal standard, governing all of our different “language games”, requires recourse to what I argue is the violence inherent in totalizing epistemological models.

The notions of universality, coherency/incoherency, and the particularity of different discourses are central to what I perceive as the thoroughgoing misunderstanding which plagues the debate over the specter of Wittgensteinian fideism. Phillips thinks he has caught Nielsen out in a paradox. Phillips attributes this to Nielsen’s acknowledgement that language possesses no absolute underlying logic, while simultaneously indicting religious discourse through an appeal to just such a standard. Far from a paradox, I perceive Nielsen to be bringing to light the ambiguity which characterizes the permeability of different discourses.

I do not believe that Phillips’ portrayal of Nielsen as caught out in a paradox is accurate. Nielsen supports the Wittgensteinian disavowal of a linguistic meta-logic. However, this does not intuit that Nielsen’s framing discourse as existing in an “overall universe” is totally wrongheaded. In confusing these two distinct notions as mutually exclusive, Phillips fails to recognize the contingencies of our collective lived experiences. I contend that we do operate within a “universe of discourse(s)” wherein our statements are held to a variety of particular criteria, native to the “rules” of the language games involved. Nielsen’s mistake is not in recognizing the “universe” of discourses, but rather apprehending in it an essential and universal criterion of coherence.



The character of the universal criterion upon which Nielsen bases his appeal for coherency can be elucidated through the terms he uses to portray religious discourse as incoherent. His main argument rests on verificationist grounds, despite his protestations otherwise. This is borne out in Nielsen's claim "that I have found a common criterion for *factual* significance – for making a true or false claim about the world – and a general method for assessing beliefs of any kind, to wit, wide and general reflective equilibrium" (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 123). Nielsen's invocation of the need for "*factual*" evidence leading to "true" or "false" conclusions evinces an empirical approach to the analysis of discourses. Nielsen's "method" affords an insight into how the heterogeneity of different discourses may be reified based upon the reduction to a homogenous taxonomy rooted in "a common criterion for *factual* significance". On these grounds I feel that it is reasonable to include Nielsen within the camp of philosophical naturalism.

Phillips' critique of Nielsen's arguments also highlights Nielsen's pre-occupation with a metaphysical and foundational view of religious discourse. A view which Phillips convincingly portrays as extraneous given that Wittgensteinian philosophers are not in the business of investigating justifications, but rather seek to describe "*what already lies before us*" (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 88). In pursuing this critique Phillips remains faithful to Wittgenstein's emphasis on the limited, descriptive role of philosophical inquiry. Upholding Wittgenstein's refusal to, "look for proofs for the existence of God.", or, "to look for philosophical foundations and justifications for religious belief" (Nielsen and Phillips 2005, 40).

In turning away from the grammar of justification, and verification, D.Z. Phillips orients the contemporary practice of the philosophy of religions in the west toward a

concern with “what already lies before us”. Religious discourses are readily observable in use across myriad cultures. The agents who engage in these discourses range from the devoutly orthodox to the avowedly secular. In certain contexts, the tropes and metaphors native to religious discourses may offer agents the most helpful language to describe the feelings engendered by a given experience. Commensurately, I argue that for certain problems encountered in moral philosophy, religious discourses can offer particularly helpful descriptive vocabularies. As demonstrated by Emmanuel Levinas in his re-imagining of phenomenology and ethics, religious vocabularies evince a unique capacity for describing the more numinous features of being. Likewise, certain religious tropes can help remind us of the finite limits of agency.

The philosopher attuned to the vision of language I have outlined in this chapter has recourse to a broad descriptive vocabulary for contributing to the unceasing discussion regarding the good life in the west. Equipped with a keen understanding of the genealogy of the tropes and metaphors particular to a given language game, said philosopher is also in a position to avoid what critics such as Fredric Jameson, have lamented is the “disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past” (Jameson 1983, 125). A menace Jameson labels “historical amnesia” (ibid).

The philosopher who abides by the understanding of language which I have argued for would be well aware of the historical implications attached to specific forms of narrative. However, such philosophers would also reject any essential claims traditionally conveyed through said narratives. In this sense, the tropes and metaphors borrowed from religious vocabularies could be used to provide descriptive interpretations

of moral and ethical problems, emphasizing the finitude of the agent in the face of the abundance of all that is other. In this fashion, religious tropes and metaphors can be used to discuss moral and ethical questions in a manner which guards against any description being resolved into a totalized epistemological model.

To be sure, the risk always exists that any language may be used in a totalizing mode. However, if we take seriously the insights advanced in our exploration of the ideas regarding language and philosophy advanced in the respective works of Levinas and Wittgenstein, I contend that we might guard against the ever-present danger of slipping into a totalizing tone. It is with this critical attitude in mind that I embark upon my (very particular) discussion, critique, and re-imagining of the moral philosophy of Charles Taylor in the following chapters.

## Chapter Two

### Sources of Sources

What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean 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. (Taylor 1991b, 16)

Any consideration of the good life necessarily includes attention toward the moral ideal, or ideals, which command one’s fealty, and around which one feels their life must gravitate in order to be understood as authentic. So says the moral theory advanced in the philosophical work of Charles Taylor regarding the conditions which frame reflection upon the moral character of one’s life (Taylor 1989b, 74). I have no doubt the passage quoted above would elicit hot debate from proponents of oppositional schools of moral philosophy. Pragmatists could charge that the statement is idealistic and naïve, out of touch with the contingencies of experience. Commensurately, proceduralists might denounce it as too abstract, noting the absence of a determinate arithmetic for ethical calculations. Finally, humanists may well be troubled by use of the term “moral ideal” which could be inferred as suggesting a source other than human.

Charles Taylor recognized the potential backlash that such a “picture” of moral thinking might illicit. Consequently, he went to great lengths to address all of these points of contention in laying out his model of moral identity development in his seminal work, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. My aim in this chapter of my dissertation is to elucidate the relationship between the concepts of meaning, knowledge, language and identity, which inform Taylor’s project in *Sources of the Self*. Toward this end, I will examine the various philosophical figures whose theories informed Taylor’s project in *Sources of the Self*. I will bolster my presentation with a detailed consideration

of the secondary literature pertinent to an analysis of Taylor's philosophical arguments, and his general philosophical disposition. This exercise will tender what I apprehend to be the sources for *Sources*, as it were.

In order to properly grasp what is at stake in Taylor's moral philosophy we must take up his arguments as they are presented in the first part of *Sources of the Self*, "Identity and the Good". In light of the title of my dissertation it will come as no great shock that the element of Taylor's theory that I find most compelling, is his concept of the "best account". A trope Taylor borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre (Taylor 1995, 52). Taylor transforms the "best account" into the "best account principle" (Taylor 1989b, 74), which I contend constitutes the fulcrum around which the whole moral theory advanced in *Sources* turns. Uniquely, in the whole corpus of Taylor's philosophical writings, it is only in the first part of *Sources* that Taylor presents a really lucid description of the "best account principle" as it pertains to a universal vision of moral ontology and the self (ibid).

The division between the first and second parts of *Sources* is a familiar theme in any discussion of *Sources of the Self*, as it was a separation first proposed in the preface of the tome by the author himself. Taylor sets up *Sources* as an "attempt to articulate and write a history of the modern identity" (Taylor 1989b, ix). Taylor explains that his writing about the history of the modern agent is necessitated by the dearth of substantive considerations of the "*grandeur et misère*" pervading the transition to modernity and the development of the modern self (Taylor 1989b, x). To remedy what Taylor perceives as a blind spot in the history of ideas, he proposes in *Sources* to "define the modern identity in describing its genesis" (ibid). This is no small task, and the sheer breadth of the book

combined with the astoundingly attentive tone of its descriptive prose, attests to the difficulty of Taylor's endeavour. Yet, there is a disingenuous note at play in Taylor's prefatory comments.

In describing the *raison d'être* of *Sources* as a philosophical and historical investigation into the makings of modern identity, Taylor claims that the first part of the book, "Identity and the Good" (which is entirely occupied with theoretical arguments and critiques of contemporary moral philosophy) was necessitated as a mere base for the historical work which unfolds in the subsequent parts of the book. These parts, two through five, deal respectively with "Inwardness", "The Affirmation of Ordinary Life", "The Voice of Nature", and "Subtler Languages". Taylor explains:

because my entire way of proceeding involves mapping connections between senses of the self and moral visions, between identity and the good, I didn't feel I could launch into this study without some preliminary discussion of these links. This seemed all the more necessary in that moral philosophies dominant today tend to obscure these connections. In order to see them, we have to appreciate the place of the good, in more than one sense, in our moral outlook and life. But this is what contemporary moral philosophies have most trouble admitting. The book therefore begins with a section which tries to make the case very briefly for a picture of the relation between self and morals, which I then draw on in the rest of the work. Those who are utterly bored by modern philosophy might want to skip part I. Those who are bored by history, if by some mistake they find this work in their hands, should read nothing else. (ibid)

Oddly, Taylor suggests that the first part of *Sources* might be "skipped" by those of a purely historical bent. Yet, Taylor's own reasoning for including "Identity and the Good" in *Sources*, indeed for inaugurating the project with it, puts the lie to his casual suggestion that one need not deal with it before proceeding to the "main body of the book" (ibid). Clearly, the philosophical critique and argument advanced by Taylor in "Identity and the Good" is integral for appreciating the whole of the project. Further, I argue that the theoretical content explored in "Identity and the Good" constitutes the most

important part of Taylor's work in writing *Sources of the Self*. I would even suggest that, the historical content presented in the latter parts of the book, actually function as a historical basis for the arguments and critiques conducted by Taylor in the first part of *Sources*.

To bear this out one need only tease out the obvious rhetorical content in Taylor's preamble. Taylor claims that the theoretical discussion carried out in "Identity and the Good" is necessitated by the way in which "moral philosophies dominant today tend to obscure" (ibid) the connections, which Taylor asserts, exist between what he terms, matter-of-factly, "identity and the good". Taylor claims that it is due to this obfuscation in modern philosophy that he is forced to commence his historical project "with a section which tries to make the case very briefly for a picture of the relation between self and morals, which I then draw on in the rest of the work" (ibid). Here, it is not clear whether Taylor is being willfully deceitful, or overly cunning. The investigation into the relation between the "self and morals" has fuelled the greater part of his philosophical life, and "Identity and the Good" represents, what I contend, to be Taylor's most thoroughgoing theoretical discourse on the subject; so why sell it so short? Taylor suggests that part one can be approached separately from the rest of the book, and vice-versa. Yet, Taylor's own reasoning for writing part one indicates that this cannot possibly be the case.

Nevertheless, for all his muddying of the importance of the first part of *Sources*, the critique and argument carried out therein neither lacks for clarity, nor pulls any punches. It is in my opinion and, at the risk of sounding sycophantic, a philosophical *tour de force*. I will spend considerable time in this chapter assembling a model of Taylor's moral philosophy through a review of his critiques, interpretations, and arguments, as

they appear in a variety of his essays. This review will help the reader approaching *Sources of the Self* unequipped with a genealogy of Taylor's own sources to understand the profound importance of the relationship between "identity and the good" in Taylor's philosophy.

Following upon the theme of the previous chapter, it seems fitting that we embark upon our exploration of Taylor's thought with some prefatory remarks regarding Taylor's perspectives on language and philosophy. Several years after the publication of *Sources of the Self*, a collection of Taylor's essays appeared under the title *Philosophical Arguments*. Although these essays were first published in a variety of different venues, some prior to the completion of *Sources* and some after, their assemblage in one compendium has proven very helpful for delineating Taylor's stance on certain aspects of language theory and philosophical inquiry. Despite the remarkably lucid and flowing style of Taylor's prose, reading *Sources* can, occasionally, prove quite vexing. Taylor has a habit of raising certain philosophical themes, and then demurring from their analysis. The result is that Taylor's position on a variety of philosophical topics, ranging from phenomenology to religion, is often very opaque. However, the essays collected in *Philosophical Arguments* offer an excellent resource for elucidating Taylor's philosophical disposition. I believe that no reading of *Sources of the Self* is complete without a commensurate reading of *Philosophical Arguments*.

In this spirit, let us set out on an exploration of what I consider to be the key essays from this collection necessary for framing Taylor's work in *Sources*. A student of philosophy taking even the most cursory look through the table of contents in *Philosophical Arguments* cannot help but notice three names included in the titles of the



essays. Two of these names belong to heavyweights of 20<sup>th</sup> century western philosophy, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The third is that of an often overlooked 18<sup>th</sup> century thinker, Johann Gottfried Herder. Once immersed in the essays themselves, the reader will encounter other philosophers whose work has strongly influenced Taylor's thought; philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Together, these thinkers represent what I consider to be (to varying degrees) the most significant influences upon Taylor's thinking in "Identity and the Good".

#### On Herder

One of the main themes of the moral theory Taylor advances in "Identity and the Good" is the tremendous power and importance of articulation (Taylor 1989b, 9-11). The significance which Taylor places upon articulation in *Sources* is rooted in his overarching concern with the linguistic dimension of phenomenology. According to Taylor, the philosopher who revolutionized the inquiry into the contours and vicissitudes of language in the west is Johann Gottfried Herder. It is Herder, Taylor claims, who functions as the "hinge figure who originates a fundamentally different way of thinking about language and meaning" (Taylor 1995, 79). Taylor devotes an entire essay to the significance of Herder's expressivist contribution to western thought. The title of Taylor's essay, "The Importance of Herder", speaks to the esteem within which he holds this often overlooked thinker. Herder's expressivism does not constitute a systematic theory. It is rather, a critical response to the arguments concerning the origins of language advanced by the likes of his fellow 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac. The main

themes of Herder's expressivist approach to language are background, situatedness, and reflection.

Herder's first important insight was to see that expression constitutes the linguistic dimension. This emerged from his understanding of linguistic thought as situated. Reflection arises in an animal form that is already dealing with the world around it. Language comes about as a new, reflective stance toward things. It arises among our earlier stances toward objects of desire or fear, to things figuring as obstacles, supports, and the like. Our stances are literally bodily attitudes or actions on or toward objects. The new stance can't be in its origins entirely unconnected with bodily posture or action. But it can't be an action just like the others, since those are definable outside the linguistic dimension. It has to be seen rather as an expressive action, one that both actualizes this stance of reflection and also presents it to others in public space. It brings about the stance whereby we relate to things in the linguistic dimension. (Taylor 1995, 92)

Addressing Taylor's essay on Herder is essential for understanding the concept of articulation underlying Taylor's use of the term in *Sources*; as expressing "the moral intuitions I have, by what I am morally moved by" (Taylor 1989b, 73). A consideration of Herder's influence upon Taylor is also important to comprehend how Taylor, trained in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, comes to include intuitive feeling as a core component in his moral philosophy. After all, it was still rather unseemly in the 1950's and 1960's for an Oxford man to delve too enthusiastically into the romantic musings of the *Sturm und Drang*. With regard to Taylor's Germanic proclivities, it must be noted that he never defected from the post-Enlightenment analytic tradition. Rather, he managed to tentatively straddle the channel between England and the Continent. Somewhat unconventionally, Taylor assumed what Nicholas H. Smith described as the role of "the leading analytic exponent of Continental philosophy" (Smith 2002, 10). Thus, the question becomes; what element in Herder's expressivist philosophy is it that Taylor found so compelling?

The importance of Herder, for Taylor's development, stems from what Taylor believes is the indirect, yet profound influence, which expressivism comes to exert upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's observations in *Philosophical Investigations*. A celebrated text which emerged over a century after Herder's own works had been largely consigned to the margins of western philosophical memory. As an Oxford trained philosopher, the roots of Taylor's appreciation for Wittgenstein's work are not so difficult to discern. Wittgenstein had a presence at neighboring Cambridge, on and off, for much of his tumultuous scholarly career. Further, while attending Oxford, Taylor studied under Wittgenstein's one time student, and devoted literary trustee and translator, G.E.M. Anscombe. Like Taylor, Wittgenstein's work overlapped the analytic/continental divide. However, unlike Taylor, Wittgenstein might better be characterized as having undertaken a conversion. Wittgenstein's transformation is evinced by his shift from a *genre* of logical fundamentalism in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, to something more in line with Herder's expressivist sentiment in his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*.

In "The Importance of Herder" Taylor endeavours to construct a genealogical relationship between Wittgenstein and Herder (Taylor 1995, 90). Taylor fleshes out this relationship in his essay regarding the latter's insights upon the engaged agency necessary for grasping the meaning of linguistic utterances, i.e. an outside, disengaged observer cannot divine the meanings conveyed within a non-native language simply through observing the nominal assignation carried out between a word and an object. Taylor details how Herder's critique of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's parable regarding the origin of language takes for granted the *a priori* existence of an expressive framework of meaning (Taylor 1995, 81). In short, Taylor asserts that, while lacking rigour, Herder's

critique nevertheless provides western philosophy with the concept of an existent background from which engaged, reflective agents draw linguistic meaning.

No one has come even close to explaining the origin of language. But by focusing on the framework understanding which language requires, Herder opened a new domain of insights into its nature. These have enabled us to get a better grasp of the essential conditions of language...

What Herder is doing, I want to claim, anticipates (and perhaps distantly influences, through many intermediaries) what Wittgenstein does when he lays out the background understanding we need to grasp an “ostensive definition.” What Wittgenstein’s opponent takes as quite unproblematic and simple turns out to be complex and not necessarily present. Appreciating this blows the opponent’s theory of meaning out of the water. (Taylor 1995, 83)

Taylor picks up the thread of expressivism in his own theory, asserting that humans are made unique by our existence within what he dubs the “linguistic dimension” (Taylor 1995, 84). With the concept of the “linguistic dimension” Taylor is laying the groundwork for an argument against an objectivist “signaling” approach to understanding language. Taylor uses the example of chimpanzee language experiments to illustrate the difference between the achievement of corollary signalization, and the nuanced expression of meaningful sentiment. According to Taylor, in the “linguistic dimension” the sense of “rightness” (or as he puts it “*le mot juste*”), is not reducible to a successful communication of signal for response/reward, as is the case in chimpanzee language training (ibid). To use the appropriate words to express one’s emotions evince a field of referential meaning far more complex and abstract than the binary calculus at the core of a reductionist theory of language such as that advanced in the Augustinian *genre* of representationalism.<sup>10</sup> I argue that reflection upon the process whereby moral agents arrive at an expression of their feelings, capable of attaining the status of “*le mot juste*”,

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor explains that the Augustinian model “can be defined in terms of its “designative” approach to the question of meaning. Words get their meaning from being used to designate objects. What they designate is their meaning.” (Taylor 1995, 80)

constitutes a main pillar of Taylor's project in *Sources of the Self*. Taylor is riveted by the notion of investigating the relationship which exists between the background of meanings, and the linguistic dimension. Taylor desires to chart the path of meaning from background to foreground, observable in the activity of articulation. A process which, I contend, Taylor sees as vital for the development of increasingly lucid, profound, and moving moral accounts on the part of agents.

One of the most important and universally recognized consequences of Herder's discovery was a certain holism of meaning. A word has meaning only within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life. In our day Wittgenstein's is the most celebrated formulation of a thesis of this kind. (Taylor 1995, 93)

In another of his essays collected in *Philosophical Arguments*, "Explanation and Practical Reason", Taylor describes how moral arguments can only sway an audience toward positions which are comprehensible against the background of their own experiences. Here, Taylor is riffing off of a concept borrowed from Martin Heidegger known as "pre-understanding" (Taylor 1995, 48). I will return to the concept of background further on in my discussion of Taylor and epistemology. At present, what is important to grasp, is that Taylor roots the comprehensibility of moves in discourse against a background understanding embedded within particular forms of life.

The task is not to convince those who are undividedly and unconfusedly attached to one first principle that they ought to shift to an entirely different one. So described, it is impossible. Rather, we are always trying to show that granted what our interlocutors already accept, they cannot but attribute to the acts or policies in dispute the significance we are urging. (Taylor 1995, 48)

Here Taylor is making a case against foundationalism in moral philosophy using the move from pre to post Galilean science as an example of rational intellectual transitions based on appeals to "our implicit understanding of our form of life" (Taylor

1995, 49). The notion of transitions will prove an important facet of my analysis of the epistemological structure underlying Taylor's theory. However, for the task at hand, it is most helpful to focus on Taylor's use of Wittgenstein's phrase to describe how we advance, and receive, theoretical arguments through languages commensurable within our shared forms of life.

Taylor argues that understanding is conveyed through languages which are inextricably bound up within the shared background held in common within our forms of life. Taylor takes a strong stance resisting what he describes as the disengaged agency characteristic of certain modes of modern thought in the west. In his essay "*Lichtung* or *Lebensform*: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein", Taylor undertakes a comparative examination of the two philosophers respective views regarding the situatedness of agents within particular conceptual spheres. Employing aspects of Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian theories, Taylor develops a vision of language as the primary means through which the menace of disengaged reasoning can be combatted, and the substantiveness of engaged agency avowed.

I have been drawing Wittgenstein and Heidegger together in these pages, seeing their philosophies as parallel attacks on the disengaged picture of the mind. Both put forward against this an account of engaged agency. Heidegger speaks of "finitude" in his account of human being (*Dasein*). Wittgenstein places the meanings of our words in the context of intelligibility of knowledge, thought, and meaning. Both propose some notion of background; and, more, both articulate some part of this background whose neglect has allowed the disengaged view to seem plausible. Articulation plays a crucial part in their argumentative strategy; it is central to the innovating force of their philosophy. (Taylor 1995, 75)

Those familiar with Taylor's *oeuvres* may remark upon my emphasising the influence of Herder's thought upon Taylor's theory, rather than that of the much more celebrated figure of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. No doubt, the omission of Hegel's

influence from an intellectual biography of Charles Taylor would be insupportable.

However, my purpose in this section of my dissertation is to outline what I contend to be the most important sources of philosophical inspiration pertinent to Taylor's moral theory as he laid it out in "Identity and the Good". The presence of Hegelian themes, such as concepts of universality and integral being, are clearly present in Taylor's theory. Yet, these tropes are not, in my estimation, as important as the expressivist theme which Taylor's distills from Herder's body of work.

Indeed, in what is widely acclaimed as Taylor's first scholarly masterwork, *Hegel*, Taylor makes a point of conveying (albeit with an economy of words) the tremendous importance for western philosophy of Herder's expressivism. In *Hegel*, Taylor undertakes a painstakingly detailed examination of the eponymous philosopher's epochal impact upon western philosophy. Taylor describes Hegel's remarkable synthesis of ideas forging a philosophy exhibiting elements derived from both the rigid rationalism of Enlightenment thought, and the surging sentiment of the Romantic revolt.

He [Hegel] was pitiless towards Romantic visions of the power of fantasy and endless creativity. He insisted that the final synthesis be one which reason could encompass. But at the same time he had a conception of the subject as essentially activity, and infinite activity. The solution lay in his conception of infinity, which incorporated the finite, and which returned to itself like a circle...Hegel agrees as he must with the main Romantic objection to Reason that it (or rather 'understanding' to use his own terminology) divides, analyses, individuates, kills. In other words, rational understanding is not possible without a clear consciousness of the distinction subject and object, self and other, the rational and the affective. And just because of this, Hegel will insist that the ultimate synthesis incorporate division as well as unity. (Taylor, 1975, 48)

So high is Taylor's regard for Hegel, that he dubs Hegel's move toward this volatile reconciliation "the central and 'mind blowing' idea of the Hegelian system" (Taylor 1975, 49). Interestingly, however, for the reader concerned with elucidating the

background of Taylor's arguments in "Identity and the Good", it is the sparse passages in *Hegel* where Taylor discusses Herder that prove most helpful. In *Sources*, Taylor envisions moral agents as explicating "what makes sense of our moral responses" through the articulation of a "framework". Taylor describes "frameworks" as providing "the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions" (Taylor 1989b, 26). Taylor's "framework" model strongly resonates with what Herder's theory of expressivity suggests. That is, that language is embedded in an ephemeral background of meanings which are transformed through reflectively informed expression.

The revolutionary idea implicit in Herder was that the development of new modes of expression enables us to have new feelings, more powerful or more refined, and certainly more self-aware. In being able to express our feelings, we give them a reflective dimension that transforms them. (Taylor 1995, 98)

I argue that the importance of Herder's ideas for Taylor rests in their ability to resist the epistemological disengagement ingrained in what I have been calling, following Taylor, philosophical naturalism.<sup>11</sup> It is the naturalist strain in western philosophy which Taylor apprehends as representing the most insidious threat to the expressive integrity celebrated in Herder's thought. The naturalist temper absorbs the brunt of Taylor's critique in *Sources* (Taylor 1989b, 79). However, the seeds of that critique are sown in the first chapter of *Hegel*, alongside a rough prototype description of the moral agent which reaches fruition over a decade later in *Sources*. The gist of the naturalist epistemology which Taylor wishes to confront is outlined in his account of how Herder's theoretical innovations disturbed the "thoroughly 'objectifying'" rules evinced by "the theories of linguistic meaning which run from Hobbes through to Condillac [which] see

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter one, page 16 of this dissertation.



meaningfulness as an external relation which certain marks, sounds, things or ideas (representations) have for us” (Taylor 1975, 14).

In “Identity and the Good” Taylor works to develop a description of agency which highlights the core elements of Herder’s insights regarding embedded, reflective expression. Like both Hegel and Herder, Taylor’s work can be, to some degree, characterized as an effort to repair the damaging legacy of Cartesian dualism. Consequently, I argue that one cannot grasp what is at stake in the vision of the self advanced by Taylor in *Sources* without understanding the elements of embedded, reflective expression advanced in Herder’s philosophy.

Hence the Herderian idea that my humanity is something unique, not equivalent to yours, and this unique quality can only be revealed in my life itself. ‘Each man has his own measure, as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other’. The idea is not just that men are different; this was hardly new; it was rather that the differences define the unique form that each of us is called on to realize. The differences take on moral import; so that the question could arise for the first time whether a given form of life was an authentic expression of certain individuals or people. This is the new dimension added by a theory of *self-realization*.

Thus the notion of human life as expression sees this not only as the realization of purposes but also as the clarification of these purposes. It is not only the fulfilment of life but also the clarification of meaning. In the course of living adequately I not only fulfil my humanity but clarify what my humanity is about. As such a clarification my life-form is not just the fulfilment of purpose but the embodiment of meaning, the expression of an idea. (Taylor 1975, 16-17)

This rather lengthy quote brings to the fore several important themes which underlie Taylor’s project in *Sources*. In no particular order, these themes are moral import, authenticity, clarification, living adequately (a value added Socratic model) and fulfilment. These themes must be framed within the “linguistic dimension” which Taylor believes encompasses our lives as conscious agents. Hence, adhering to Taylor’s conceptual picture of language, it is evident that expression (or articulation) offers agents

a conduit for clarifying the background elements of meaning which resonate within them as morally important. Overarching this whole chain of significance and signification is the somewhat Socratic question of “living adequately”, and the distinctly modern imperative to realize an authentic identity.

### On The Linguistic Dimension

Although Taylor never explicitly tenders a theory of language in his work, he does employ a subtle and nuanced reading of Wittgenstein, Herder, and Heidegger to map out the dimensions of what he apprehends to be the “linguistic dimension”. I contend that the delicate character of Taylor’s hermeneutic approach is necessitated by the radical nature of the linguistic claims Taylor ultimately makes. What becomes apparent in the various texts which Taylor has produced dealing to greater or lesser degrees with concepts of language, meaning and agency, is that Taylor believes a force of attraction emanates from the background of the “linguistic dimension”. Furthermore, Taylor suggests that this force places claims upon us as conscious agents. Taylor is careful not to give this force a name, which would constitute an objectifying gesture apropos to the naturalist ideology he is arguing against. Rather, Taylor employs the tropes of worthiness and desire to communicate the magnetism at play in the “linguistic dimension”.

Only language beings can identify things as *worthy* of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness. They involve a characterization of things which is not reducible simply to the way we treat them as objects of desire or aversion. They involve a recognition beyond that: they *ought* to be treated in one way or another. (Taylor 1995, 106)

It is very important to pay attention to the use of *italics* in this passage. Taylor emphasises the notion of *worth* which intuitively means meaningfulness, substance, allure, and the

verb *ought* with all its attendant senses of dutifulness, responsibility, perhaps even command. Taylor's use of *italics* to drive home the import of what he contends are definitive conditions of linguistic being elucidate the scope of his disagreement with the objectifying worldview characteristic of naturalism. In Taylor's estimation, categories of meaning (such as love, justice, loyalty etc.), which emerge from the background of shared meanings through articulation convey their own strong sense of worthiness which exists distinct from the vicissitudes of the context of their expression.

In short, language beings are compelled to use certain terms to express a desired sense of meaning, and their articulations can never exhaust the potential of the meanings expressed. Thus, for Taylor, there are plenty of paths toward *le mot juste*, but no one has rights to *le mot final*. Furthermore, as languages convey meanings which, according to Taylor, express inherent qualities of *worth* it becomes apparent that to "move from nonlinguistic to linguistic agency is to move to a world in which a new kind of issue is at play, a right use of signs which is not reducible to task-rightness" (Taylor 1995, 105). The question is then, what are the conditions which govern the "right use of signs"? It is my contention that, for Taylor, one condition for measuring the right use of a sign is the degree of clarification of the background it provides for articulating an authentic account of one's moral identity; an account in tune with, and *worthy* of, the ideals which one feels one *ought* to live up to.

#### On Moral Realism and Non-Realism

Through a careful reading of Taylor's essays dealing with the approaches to language and philosophy in Herder, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, one can begin to assemble the component parts of the theoretical model advanced in *Sources*. From Herder

comes the emphasis on expression, from Hegel a vision of symmetrical agency, from Wittgenstein an elucidated description of background as forms of life, and from Heidegger a constitutive description of language as *Lichtung*, a clearing wherein we apprehend that “ours is a world in which things have worth, in which there are goods in the strong sense: things *worth* pursuing” (Taylor 1995, 113). Much like the philosophers Taylor draws inspiration from, his work defies easy classification. At best, we might describe Taylor’s blending of elements from romantic, Enlightenment, theistic and analytic traditions, coupled with his staunch anti-naturalism, as evincing a *genre* of moral realism.<sup>12</sup> I am well aware that characterizing Taylor as a moral realist raises a variety of questions regarding what this realism might look like. Is it akin to a variety of humanism; or, perhaps, a dissimulated deism?

I believe that Taylor himself offers the most lucid description of what I am labeling his moral realism. In the course of an attack he launches upon the objectifying bent of naturalism in the second chapter of *Sources*, Taylor paints a fairly clear picture of what he apprehends to be morally real.

Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with. (Taylor 1989b, 59)

Taylor proceeds to clearly state that what he is contesting is the influence of a “naturalist inspired metaphysical picture, say, of humans as objects of science, or as part of a disenchanted universe” (ibid). I will return to this section later on when I take up Taylor’s arguments in *Sources*. However, this brief foray into the text is helpful for elucidating the

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<sup>12</sup> I am not alone in describing Taylor as a “moral realist”; see Melissa A. Orlie’s “Taylor and Feminism” pg. 162, note 29, in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey. 2004. Cambridge University Press

nature of the moral realism to which Taylor subscribes. Furthermore, this passage reinforces the now familiar current of anti-naturalism central to Taylor's philosophic enterprise.

As we have seen, Taylor's critical attitude toward philosophical naturalism can be discerned in a great many of his works. However, it is in his essay "Overcoming Epistemology" that I would argue Taylor launches his most powerful attack against naturalism. The title of this essay is as close to being bombastic as Taylor ever comes in his writing. The reader can feel the heat of the argument against the naturalist paradigm waft off the pages of this essay. Polemical is not an adjective commonly attached to Taylor's writing. However, in regard to this essay it does, at times, seem appropriate. I will take this opportunity to re-affirm my own esteem for the use of rhetoric in philosophical argument and disclose that I find Taylor's execution of his argument in "Overcoming Epistemology" quite powerful, yet not unproblematic.

In this essay Taylor describes the contemporary state of epistemology, as a discipline of moral philosophy, as being in a "bad way" (Taylor 1995, 1). Taylor distinguishes between the pre-dominance which a positivistic, or objectivist, epistemological model enjoyed in the analytic universe of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, against the phenomenological challenge which enjoyed popularity on the Continent (ibid). Taylor explains that the concept of knowledge as constituting an empirically objective field amenable to a disengaged, rational inquiry inaugurated by Descartes and refined by Locke and Kant, has begun to be regarded as profoundly mistaken by various camps in western philosophy (Taylor 1995, 2).

Following Taylor's diagnosis, he explores the substance of the revolt against what he describes, rather broadly, as the epistemological tradition. Taylor turns to Richard Rorty's famous description of epistemology in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as a "foundational enterprise" (ibid). Taylor examines the underlying philosophical aspirations which Rorty's critical description of epistemology conveys. However, Taylor does not accept that the way to overcome epistemology simply involves setting aside foundationalist aspirations. Taylor outlines how epistemology can also be critically interpreted in a way that "focuses not so much on foundationalism as on the understanding of knowledge that made it possible" (Taylor 1995, 2-3). Taylor presents this mode of understanding as knowledge defined as a "correct representation of an independent reality. In its original form, it saw knowledge as the inner depiction of an outer reality" (Taylor 1995, 3). The original form being that derived from Descartes' meditations. Taylor believes that a serious critique of epistemology needs to go further than the mere indictment of foundationalism. For Taylor, a critical investigation of epistemology requires the substantive consideration of the form of knowledge foundationalism presupposes.

The reason why some thinkers prefer to focus on this interpretation, rather than merely on the foundationalist ambitions that are ultimately (as Quine has shown) detachable from it, is that it is bound up with very influential and often not fully articulated notions about science and about the nature of human agency. Through these it connects with certain central moral and spiritual ideas of the modern age. If one's aim is, in challenging the primacy of epistemology, to challenge these ideas as well, then one has to take it up in this wider—or deeper—focus, and not simply show the vanity of the foundational enterprise. (ibid)

In charting a course for overcoming epistemology, Taylor undertakes precisely the type of critical challenge to what he considers the vague moral and spiritual ideas and ideals alluded to above. Taylor undertakes a genealogical analysis tracing the emergence

in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of a “new mechanistic science”, and the upheaval this worldview portended for the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian ontic model (ibid). Taylor outlines how philosophers, such as Locke, transposed the mechanistic model from the emergent natural sciences into philosophical argument in order to craft a representationalist episteme wherein knowledge “hangs on a certain relation holding between what is “out there” and certain inner states that this external reality causes in us” (Taylor 1995, 4).

In usurping the Greek notion of ideas and forms, the champions of a Newtonian worldview advanced the Cartesian divorce of mind from matter. The effect of this disengagement bestowed upon the naturalist agent a, supposed, objective capacity to examine not only natural phenomena, but also “the contents of his own mind” (ibid). Endowed with such oversight the naturalist agent is able to, through a rigorous intellectual discipline, rationally weigh the evidence for given representational propositions about reality, and arrive at a clear, certain, and verifiable outcome. Taylor claims that the new representational episteme born of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophical adoption of the mechanistic worldview, constructed by the then burgeoning natural sciences, intuitively venerates “dignity and freedom”. Taylor asserts that this ideal has become entrenched in contemporary western thought. Helpfully, Taylor lays out a three pronged description of the content of the ideal he discerns as underlying the mode of understanding native to the disengaged rational and representational model.

The first is the picture of the subject as ideally disengaged, that is, as free and rational to the extent that he has fully distinguished himself from the natural and social worlds, so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside him in these worlds. The second, which flows from this, is a punctual view of the self, ideally ready as free and rational to treat these worlds—and even some of the features of his own character—instrumentally, as subject to change and reorganizing in order the better to secure the welfare of himself and others. The third is the social consequence of the first two: an atomistic construal of

society as constituted by, or ultimately to be explained in terms of, individual purposes. (Taylor 1995, 7)

In “Overcoming Epistemology” Taylor treats this description as applicable to epistemology *tout court*. However, read against the previously quoted passage from *Sources*, wherein Taylor challenges the assumptions of the “naturalist inspired metaphysical picture” (Taylor 1989b, 59), it becomes apparent that “Overcoming Epistemology”, could well have been titled overcoming naturalism. “Overcoming Epistemology” originally appeared in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*. This 1987 all-star compendium of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers offered a variety of approaches to answering the titular question. The question of whether philosophy was facing its end, or a transformation, helps to elucidate what Taylor sought to accomplish in “Overcoming Epistemology”. I also believe this question can help to frame Taylor’s more detailed critique of naturalism executed in *Sources*.

In “Overcoming Epistemology” was Taylor addressing the “End” of philosophy, or auguring for a “Transformation” of its normative mode of understanding? One need not delve too deeply into Taylor’s works to ascertain that he would reject outright the notion of an end of philosophy. In light of this, it is apparent that Taylor’s arguments in “Overcoming Philosophy” are transformative in nature. The question then becomes transformation into what? What mode of understanding does Taylor apprehend as more worthy for the furtherance of the philosophical enterprise in the west?

Taylor begins to shape an alternative to the disengaged model of understanding in “Overcoming Epistemology”. Through a review of what he terms the “classic critiques of epistemology” advanced by the now familiar voices of Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein (as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose importance to Taylor I will



explore later on) Taylor directly challenges the premise of rational disengagement central to representational understanding. Taylor re-visits Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, asserting that, to arrive at the very idea of rational disengagement requires the taking up of a representational understanding embedded in phenomenal existence which, *ipso facto*, is to acknowledge our position as worldly agents

Once we take this point, then the entire epistemological position is undermined. Obviously foundationalism goes, since our representations of things—the kinds of objects we pick out as whole, enduring entities—are grounded in the way we deal with those things. These dealings are largely inarticulate, and the project of articulating them fully is an essentially incoherent one, just because any articulative project would itself rely on a background or horizon of nonexplicit engagement with the world. (Taylor, 1995, 11)

Taylor's claim to have undermined the representationalist paradigm rests upon a mode of understanding human agency as embedded in the world. Taylor is advocating a phenomenological approach to knowledge which takes seriously the notion of embodiment and embeddedness in the world.

Hubert L. Dreyfus provides a finely detailed examination of what he refers to as Taylor's "(anti-) epistemology" in an essay of the same name. Dreyfus' work focuses upon the disagreement between Taylor and his opponents over the notion of mediation as a component of knowledge claims. Dreyfus provides an excellent summary of Taylor's position *contra* that of his opponents.

Taylor argues that no mental representations, be they sense data, visual experiences, or intentional content, and so forth, mediate our relation to everyday reality... Taylor's goal is to reveal the inner/outer structure of all epistemologies, even recent would-be anti-epistemologies, and to present and defend an opposed view, a view that denies that the inner/outer dichotomy in any form correctly describes our basic relation to reality. (Dreyfus 2004, 53)

Taylor, in Dreyfus' account, offers up a phenomenological account wherein the agent has no recourse to any mediating or intervening buffer with experience; they are always,

already engaged in the world. This engagement is a characteristic of agents' embodiment. Dreyfus is careful to point out how Taylor depends upon a concept of embodiment derived from the theory of Samuel Todes, set against aspects of Merleau-Ponty's "*être au monde*", Heidegger's *Dasein*, and Wittgenstein's notion of background (Dreyfus 2004, 54). What emerges is a model of embodiment wherein the agent is understood as a perceptual being who orients themselves in the world in large part through a, taken for granted, sense of "embedded knowing" (Dreyfus 2004, 56). Thus, all understanding is necessarily rooted in our embodied nature.<sup>13</sup> Further, "embedded knowing" not only precludes the possibility of disengaged reasoning, but also the "coherentist" model of knowledge consisting "solely of beliefs that are justified by other beliefs" (ibid).

Here Taylor is challenging not only the non-realist naturalists, but also pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty. Rorty and Taylor enjoyed a long correspondence debating facets of epistemology and ontology. Rorty's main critique of Taylor centers on Taylor's construal of the intrinsic meaning of objects in the world independent from human description. Rorty explains his differences with Taylor in typically witty style in his essay "Taylor on truth" (which appeared in a volume of essays edited by James Tully which I will examine in greater detail later on). In this essay Rorty ultimately concludes, true to his philosophical convictions, that he must pragmatically "hang on to the moral impetus" while "dropping the very idea of ontology" (Rorty 1994, 33). Taylor could never follow Rorty down this path as ontology represents a central theme in Taylor's model of moral agency. In the introduction to Taylor's "Overcoming Epistemology" in

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<sup>13</sup> In the course of my dissertation I will expand upon the concept of embodiment in Taylor's work, paying particular attention to the influence of Merleau-Ponty.

*After Philosophy* the editors provide a good description of the type of agent Taylor's model pre-supposes.

To "overcome epistemology" means not only to give up foundationalist ambitions (as Quine, for instance has done) but also to develop a deeper and more adequate conception of human agency (something Quine's behaviorism does not do). The path to this conception leads through a "kind of transcendental argument" that discloses the indispensable conditions of experiencing a world, that is, of intentionality... It reveals that we are first and foremost embodied agents in a natural and social world. Our propositional knowledge of this world is grounded in our dealings with it; and there can be no question of totally objectifying the prior grasp we have of it as agents within it. The task of philosophy is an unending one of articulating elements of this largely unarticulated background, of disclosing what it involves, thus making partial detachment and revision possible... It leads to a better, deeper, and more valid understanding of what we are as knowing, speaking, and acting subjects, and thereby provides insight into the anthropological questions that often underlie our moral concerns. In this sense it is a continuation-through-transformation of the idea of philosophical self-responsibility based on philosophical self-clarification. (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy 1987, 461-462)

This astute description serves not only to convey Taylor's aims in writing "Overcoming Epistemology" it also serves as, a perhaps unwitting, introduction to Taylor's motives for writing *Sources of the Self*. A great deal is stated in the above passage that requires unpacking. Doubtless, we are now familiar with the phenomenological tradition to which Taylor subscribes borrowing from Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty. Consequently, we are also well acquainted with the disengaged models of knowledge constructed by Descartes, Locke, Husserl *et al.* that Taylor is writing against. However, the character of Taylor's own model of understanding knowledge remains to some degree, opaque. We have Dreyfus' portrayal of Taylor's "(anti-) epistemology" to consider. However, I argue that Dreyfus is overly concerned with the disagreement between Rorty and Taylor over mediation and reality,

ignoring the “anthropological questions that often underlie our moral concerns” alluded to by the editors of *After Philosophy* (Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy 1987, 462).

It is readily apparent that Taylor’s model of understanding revolves around embodied existence. However, how does the embodied agent, equipped with “embedded knowing”, come to a “better, deeper, and more valid understanding” of their “moral concerns” through “self-clarification” (ibid). What exactly does this “self-clarification” involve? Taylor provides some indication in another of his essays entitled “Explanation and Practical Reason”, originally published in 1989, (the same year which saw the publication of *Sources*) which echoes the idea of transformation in the sub-title of *After Philosophy*; only here Taylor describes these clarification moves as “transitions”.

#### On Transitions

At this juncture it is important that I clarify a position. I do not accept Taylor’s overly-broad argument concerning the need to overcome epistemology. Taylor’s campaign against epistemology is, I contend, neither sustainable as a philosophical endeavour, nor a particularly accurate depiction of what Taylor actually argues for in his essay. Based on our review of both Taylor’s own claims, as well as the secondary literature pertinent to the topic, I assert that what Taylor wishes to overcome is a specific strand of epistemology native to philosophical naturalism. I do not wish to contest the claim that the roots of modern modes of epistemology, predominant in the west, spring from Descartes’ long ago meditation. However, to move from this genealogical analysis to a definition of epistemology as Cartesian, in both root and branch, is a bridge too far. The term epistemology has, in contemporary scholarly usage, come to be understood as dealing with a plethora of different conceptions of knowledge and understanding. This is

evinced by the dissensus regarding a definition of the term outlined in the preceding chapter. In light of the pervasive use of, and heterogeneous meanings conveyed by the term epistemology in modern western philosophy, I believe Taylor's quest to overcome it to be at best quixotic, and at worst, disingenuous. It is on these grounds that I suggest we might add a word to the original title of the essay which will give us a better grasp of what is at stake for Taylor in his arguments; "Overcoming [bad] Epistemology".

Following Taylor's own claims, it is evident that what he is proposing is not that we replace a representationalist model of knowledge with a brand of neo-scepticism, but rather that we embrace an embodied, and engaged model of understanding as the basis for acquiring knowledge. Dreyfus provides a good example of Taylor's alternative to the representational and disengaged models of knowledge in his discussion of Taylor's attempt to bolster the "powerful critique of dualist epistemology mounted by John McDowell" (Dreyfus 2004, 57).

Taylor, therefore, seeks to show how an account of the basic levels of perception and the epistemic skills involved in forming a belief would enable McDowell to understand that there are degrees of perceptual support beneath rational justification – that our propositionally formed beliefs can only arise on the basis of a more basic skillful contact with the world that is prepropositional and in part even preconceptual.

Taylor agrees with McDowell that reasoning is an exercise of a norm – guided capacity; it is thus an exercise of spontaneity in us, or otherwise put, of freedom...

Taylor agrees with McDowell that if we want to see how constraint and spontaneity come together, we have to find this in perception. But Taylor insists that to do so, we have to bring out how our ability to form beliefs like "the picture is crooked" draw on preconceptual epistemic skills. (Dreyfus 2004, 58)

Understanding the relationships Taylor envisions existing between the preconceptual, perception, spontaneity, and reason, is central to grasping Taylor's understanding of knowledge. Or, what I argue is best understood as Taylor's own

epistemological paradigm. To be sure, my use of the term epistemology in regard to Taylor's theory of knowledge is bound to raise some hackles. However, I firmly believe that my analysis will bear out the fact that a rose by any other name is still a rose, and so it is also with epistemology.

In Taylor's essay "Explanation and Practical Reason" he once again takes up his now familiar challenge to the representationalist model of understanding knowledge, which he persists in calling epistemology, full stop. However, Taylor adds to his challenge a dimension concerning what he feels is the misuse (or abuse) of reason to perpetuate moral scepticism. Taylor elaborates upon this as the "widespread belief that moral positions can't be argued, that moral differences can't be arbitrated by reason, that when it comes to moral values, we all just ultimately have to plump for the ones which feel best to us" (Taylor 1995, 34). Taylor portrays this as a sort of "subjectivism" (ibid). In this brief summary of what he apprehends to colour the contemporary moral perspective in the west, Taylor reveals his own deep *malaise* regarding modernity. For Taylor, the notion that moral understanding is purely a matter of personal feeling, and that one's ideas about the good hold no truck with either rational reflection or strong argument, sounds the death knell for a substantive picture of "practical reason".

To accept what Taylor derides as "subjectivism" is, he claims, to accept that differences regarding moral attitudes are incommensurable with rational disputation. Taylor rejects the scepticism inherent in what he apprehends to be the "subjectivist" vision of moral atomism, arguing that it is based on a misconception of what it means to rationally disprove a given moral attitude. Taylor elucidates what he considers the wrongheaded view of reason as the notion that one must advance "facts or principles"

which an opponent cannot but accept as proof of their being wrong (Taylor 1995, 35). The imprint of the empirical model of proof is clearly in evidence in what Taylor considers the “wrong view of practical reason” (ibid). Taylor is arguing that the mode of reasoning at work in the proof arguments of naturalist philosophy has confused the use of practical reasoning in philosophical discourse. In trying to emulate the positivistic grounds of argument native to the empirical form of reason inaugurated by Newton *et al.* naturalist philosophers have alienated agents from the use of practical reasoning appropriate to moral deliberation. Taylor casts the use of practical reason in moral affairs as a process of “strong evaluation”.

The opposition to this naturalist reduction has come from a philosophical stance that might in a broad sense be called “phenomenological.” By this I mean a focus on our actual practices of moral deliberation, debate, understanding. The attempt is to show, in one way or another, that the vocabularies we need to explain human thought, action, feeling, or to explicate, analyze, justify ourselves or each other, or to deliberate on what to do, all inescapably rely on strong evaluation. Or put negatively, that the attempt to separate out a language of neutral description, which combined with commitments or pro/con attitudes might recapture and make sense of our actual explanations, analyses, or deliberations leads to failure and will always lead to failure. (Taylor 1995, 38-39)

Strong evaluation is the title Taylor applies to his concept of an engaged and embodied model of rational reflection. Taylor uses strong evaluation to refer to a process whereby moral intuitions regarding the worthiness of an idea, object, or action, are subjected to a process of practical reasoning by the engaged agent embedded in the world. Here, the influence of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is especially evident. Taylor’s concept of strong evaluation depends upon a notion of being in the world which marries preconceptual embodiment (borrowed from Heidegger’s “pre-understanding”), with conscious perception in an epistemological system that makes practical reason possible; allowing that “Within a human situation inescapably characterized in strongly evaluative

terms, we can see how argument aimed at self-clarification might in principle at least bring agreement” (ibid). Taylor is engaged in a phenomenological argument. However, he adds to this argument a dimension wherein the intrinsic worth of an action, object or idea, impinges upon our reasoning process, and in some sense demands our attention.

According to Taylor we can't help but be moved by the worthiness of some idea, or course of action, as better than another. Further, this compelling feeling of worth is first experienced “preconceptually”. Aspects of this position are not uncommon in the history of western philosophy. Plato's forms, the Romantics emotivism, are relevant for understanding Taylor. Heidegger's pre-understanding, and Wittgenstein's forms of life, also evince elements which resonate with Taylor's theory. Taylor, however, is not overly concerned with explaining or describing the character of the preconceptual intuition itself. Taylor seems content to use the body of thought developed by the aforementioned philosophers as a basis for launching his own project. As a consequence of this, any probing analysis of the precise character of the moral intuition in Taylor's theory returns us to the sources he himself draws upon for inspiration. Thus, taking the preconceptual intuition as an *a priori* given, Taylor advances an argument calling for a sophisticated theory of moral articulation.

we are led to recognize a human constant: a mode of understanding of a given domain D, which consists in our ability to make our way about and effect our purposes in D. We might borrow a term from Heidegger, and call this understanding as we originally have it prior to explication or scientific discovery “pre-understanding.” One of the directions of increasing knowledge of which we are capable consists in making this pre-understanding explicit, and then in extending our grasp of the connections which underlie our ability to deal with the world as we do. Knowledge of this kind is intrinsically linked with increased ability to effect our purposes, with the acquisition of potential recipes for more effective practice. In some cases, it is virtually impossible to extend such knowledge without making new recipes available; and an extension of our practical capacities is therefore a reliable criterion of increasing knowledge.



Because of these links between understanding and practical ability, we cannot deny whatever increases our capacities its title as a gain in knowledge in some sense. (Taylor 1995, 48)

### Argument

In this passage, Taylor forges the connection between the preconceptual intuition (which in itself remains rather muddy), the force of attraction, or worth, of non-subjective goods (subjective being understood according to Taylor's definition described above), rational reflection configured by Taylor as a process of strong evaluation, and articulation in the form of an explication of this background constituting an increase in knowledge concerning our being in the world. Taylor refers to this increase in knowledge leading from a less lucid understanding to a more lucid understanding, "effecting our purposes" in the world, as a "transition" (Taylor 1995, 47). The model described above, coupled with the action oriented descriptor "transition", represent the grounds upon which I argue that Taylor advances his own epistemological paradigm; one I will call transitional epistemology.

Taylor is championing a theory of knowledge based upon what he terms practical reason, which he roots in an engaged and embedded picture of embodied agency *contra* the representational and disengaged models of knowledge and agency trumpeted by philosophical naturalists. The fundamental difference between Taylor and his opponents can be summarized as the contrast between an understanding of knowledge oriented toward engaged agency (Taylor), and an understanding of knowledge oriented toward disengaged agency (naturalists). From this flows the further disagreement over moral realism versus anti-realism etc. Nevertheless, the model which Taylor counter poses to

that of the naturalists remains best described as an epistemological theory, as it seeks to explain the process by which human beings make epistemic gains in knowledge.

Of course this epistemological model does not float freely about; it is anchored to Taylor's suppositions concerning moral agency. Taylor frames agents' transitions to more lucid understandings against the background of their embeddedness in the world. Paralleling his epistemological critique, Taylor employs the background trope to launch an attack on what he considers the naturalist ontological model. In his essay, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein", Taylor asserts that the naturalist subscription to a disengaged concept of agency implies a monological vision of being.

The disengaged view is irresistibly monological, because the explicit knowledge it focuses on must consist of input and processing, which can only take place in individuals. Once we underpin it with a mechanistic account, monologicality is reinforced by the thought that all this must be going on within individual organisms. But once we see the crucial role of the background, we are liberated from this perspective. The background understanding we share, interwoven with our practices and ways of relating, isn't necessarily something we partake in as individuals. That is, it can be part of the background understanding of a certain practice or meaning that it is not mine but ours; and it can indeed be "ours" in a number of ways: as something intensely shared, which binds a community; or as something quite impersonal, where we act just as "anyone" does. Bringing in the background allows us to articulate the ways in which our form of agency is nonmonological, in which the seat of certain practices and understandings is precisely *not* the individual but one of the common spaces between. (Taylor 1995, 76-77)

Taylor's reference to the "common spaces between" points to the common ground for reasoning and argument which he ascertains to be lacking in the naturalist monological model of ontology. In contrast to the naturalist model, wherein reasoning is conducted in a disengaged fashion, Taylor's model of reasoning depends in large part upon the shared terrain of a "common" background of meanings. It is against this

background, and within “common spaces”, that engaged agents make transitions to better understandings which allow for the conduct of better lives. Here is where the moral and spiritual impetus begins to be felt in Taylor’s arguments.

A central tenet of what I am calling Taylor’s transitional epistemology is that agents are persistently engaged with sources of erudition which must be disclosed through language. Thus, for Taylor, agents are cast (following Heidegger) as existing in “a world in which things have worth, in which there are goods in the strong sense: things *worth* pursuing” (Taylor 1995, 113). It is in the pursuit of these, at times competing, goods that agents develop moral identities through the transitional clarification of “self-reading”, accomplished through strong evaluation (Taylor 1995, 52).

Combined with the stress Taylor places on the narrative component, detailed in the passages quoted above, what emerges from this process is advancement in self-understanding articulated as a better account of moral identity. As noted at the beginning of this chapter the notion of an epistemic gain as a “best account” is one which Taylor borrowed from Alasdair MacIntyre (Taylor 1995, 52). Taylor uses the trope of the “best account” to deploy a *genre* of dynamic and open knowledge claim combining a strong sense of rational adjudication and reflection, with a keen sense of tentativeness. This has the effect of leaving the door open to further transitions toward better accounts.

It is crucial to transition arguments that they make a more modest claim. They are inherently comparative. The claim is not that Y is correct *simpliciter* but just that whatever is “ultimately true,” Y is better than X. It is, one might say, less false. The argument is thus specifically addressed to the holders of X. Its message is: whatever else turns out to be true, you can improve your epistemic position by moving from X to Y; this step is a gain. But nothing need follow from this for the holders of third, independent positions. Above all, there is no claim to the effect that Y is the ultimate resting point of inquiry. The transition claim here is perfectly compatible with a further one which might one day be established, identifying a new position Z, which in turn supersedes Y. (ibid)

Based upon our examination of Taylor's philosophical influences and arguments we can discern how his concept of the "best account principle" emerged from his critique of naturalism, coupled with his interpretations of aspects from the works of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Herder, Hegel, Merleau-Ponty *et al.* Understanding the philosophical background of Taylor's thinking provides a framework for studying the roles which language, meaning, and morality, play in the model of moral agency he constructs in "Identity and the Good". Furnished with this genealogy of Taylor's thought we will move on, in the next chapter, to a more penetrating investigation of Taylor's description of the "best account", and the moral theory which underlies it, in *Sources of the Self*.

## Chapter Three

### *Sources Re-Visited*

The most reliable moral view is not one that would be grounded quite outside our intuitions but one that is grounded on our strongest intuitions, where these have successfully met the challenge of proposed transitions away from them.

(Taylor 1989b, 75)

In this chapter of my dissertation I will undertake an exploration of the terminology pertinent to understanding what is at issue vis-à-vis the description of moral agency built into Taylor's concept of the "best account principle". I will also address the paucity of secondary work which specifically undertakes a serious consideration of the "best account principle", and the directions in moral philosophy such a consideration might make possible. Finally, I will conclude the chapter posing a series of critical questions pertaining to the "picture" of morality and selfhood advanced by Taylor in *Sources of the Self*. This critical intervention will form the basis for the arguments that I will advance in the subsequent chapters of my dissertation.

In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor's voice is clear, methodical, and possessing of a certain charming demeanor that leaves an impression of effortless grace, and a complete lack of affectation. On the whole, *Sources* is written in a masterly style which is emblematic of Taylor's prose when he is at his best. The sweeping arc of intellectual history covered by Taylor in *Sources* is nothing less than prodigious. Although often teasingly referred to as a "big" book, it is actually quite a feat that Taylor managed to cover so succinctly the development of the modern idea of the self in just one volume; thick though it may be. Further, the thesis upon which the book is based, that "Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably

intertwined themes” (Taylor 1989b, 3). remains a persistent presence throughout all the different parts, both theoretical and historical.

In *Sources*, Taylor advances a description of engaged moral agency wherein reflection upon, and expression of, the moral goods which agents discern to command their love and respect, allows for transitions to increasingly authentic self-realization. Taylor contrasts his description of engaged moral agency with a painstaking historical description of the development of the dominant naturalist, atomistic model of agency, and the disengaged self it has borne into contemporary moral philosophy.

Much contemporary moral philosophy, particularly but not only in the English speaking world, has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections I want to draw here are incomprehensible in its terms. This moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance or, as Iris Murdoch portrayed in her work, as the privileged focus of our attention or will. This philosophy has accredited a cramped and truncated view of morality in a narrow sense, as well as of the whole range of issues involved in the attempt to live the best possible life, and this not only among professional philosophers, but with a wider public. (ibid)

Given our familiarity with Taylor’s philosophical temperament, no great mystery surrounds which western philosophical tradition he impugns as accrediting a “cramped and truncated view of morality”. The “obstacle” obstructing the commensurability of Taylor’s theoretical extrapolation of the integral relationship between the self and the good, is the disengaged tone of naturalist philosophical language. Taylor states as much later on in the first part of *Sources* in his description (which we have already encountered<sup>14</sup>) of the “naturalist-inspired metaphysical picture, say, of humans as objects of science, or as part of a disenchanted universe” (Taylor 1989b, 59). This description is important because it exemplifies the *genre* of language which Taylor feels puts up a wall

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<sup>14</sup> See chapter two pgs.73-74 of this dissertation for my first use of the quotation.

between agents and the moral sources with which he believes they must engage in order to develop a healthy moral identity.

### On Malaise

The notion of health represents an underlying theme in *Sources*. In Taylor's thinking, the atomistic, disengaged model of agency, which grows out of a language governed by naturalist representational epistemology, breeds what Taylor has persistently referred to as a "*malaise*". Taylor's diagnosis of a "*malaise*" afflicting modernity is best documented in the series of Massey lectures which he delivered on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio program Ideas in 1991. These lectures were entitled "The Malaise of Modernity", and were subsequently published in a slim volume.<sup>15</sup> The disturbing specter of a *malaise* afflicting modernity, and more particularly modern agents, raises the question; what species of malady are we dealing with? An answer to this question may arise through an examination of a passage from the latter half of *Sources*, which is meant to be the province only of those readers of a historical bent.

The notion of a *malaise* appears in part four of *Sources* "The Voice of Nature". In the course of laying out the legacy of what Taylor elsewhere quite pithily described as the "great intramural debate of the last two centuries, pitting the philosophy of the Enlightenment against the various forms of Romantic Opposition" (Taylor 1989b, 101), he takes up the "debate" as it plays out over competing ecological worldviews. To the descendants of the "Romantic religions of nature" Taylor ascribes a powerful sense of human beings as woven into nature; body, mind, and soul. To the keepers of the Enlightenment dictums of rational objectivism, Taylor ascribes an instrumental

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<sup>15</sup> This volume appeared under two different titles; *The Malaise of Modernity* (in Canada), and *The Ethics of Authenticity* (in the United States).

methodology of controlling nature as an objectified field; from which humans are in a sense separated by virtue of our capacity for disengaged reasoning. Taylor portrays these rival accounts of the relationship between humans and the natural world as a confrontation over “spiritual outlooks”.

This dispute between spiritual outlooks is deeply embedded in the inner conflicts of advanced industrial, capitalist societies. Instrumental reason plays such a large role in their institutions and practices that whatever shakes our confidence in it as a spiritual stance also causes a deep malaise in contemporary advanced societies. (Taylor 1989b, 384)

This brief allusion to a “deep malaise in contemporary advanced societies” provides some clues as to what sort of condition we are dealing with. In this section of *Sources* Taylor references his use of the term *malaise* to his 1985, two volume work, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. While Taylor links the mores of modern consumer culture with a certain sense of *malaise* in the essay “Legitimation Crisis?” from that collection, the notion of *malaise* is, at best, sketchy at that point in Taylor’s thought. However, in this part of *Sources* he ties the emergence of this malaise with the faltering of a worldview rooted in the disengaged, representational understanding of knowledge and language native to naturalist philosophy. Hence, the *malaise* is at least to some degree tied to a way of speaking about the world. What Taylor suggests is that when the objectifying grammar of naturalist language, which stresses instrumental reasoning, is challenged, agents become disoriented, ill at ease in the world. I argue that Taylor apprehends a cure for this *malaise* in the form of what I termed above his transitional epistemology. The allure of naturalist, disengaged language is strong, however. Thus, Taylor must develop a language capable of expressing his concept of knowledge rooted in engaged agency and practical reasoning, which can hold its ground in contemporary



moral discourse. In tendering the “best account principle”, I contend Taylor advances just such a language, and that to some extent, *Sources of the Self* constitutes a vehicle for its dissemination.

Throughout *Sources* Taylor conveys an ever-present concern for repairing the detrimental effects which naturalist thinking have wrought on the understanding of engaged agents, embedded in the space of moral questions (Taylor 1989b, 25-29). Early on, Taylor describes his work in *Sources* as containing “an important element of retrieval” (Taylor 1989b, 4). This raises the question; what is it he is attempting to retrieve? Taylor’s arguments never veer toward the pedantic, and although he has self-identified as a Roman Catholic, his discussions betray no particularly dogmatic agenda. Taylor himself states in *Sources* that the lion’s share of his “effort in Part I will be directed towards enlarging our range of legitimate moral descriptions, and in some cases retrieving modes of thought and description which have misguidedly been made to seem problematic” (Taylor 1989b, 3). Taylor goes on to reiterate the refrain oft encountered in his works regarding the necessity of recognizing and articulating the moral obligations which emanate from the background of our languages (ibid).

Taylor also includes an investigation of “what lies behind some of the moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries” in his mandate for part one of *Sources* (Taylor 1989b, 4). In defining what the notion of “moral and spiritual intuitions” encompasses, Taylor combines senses of respect for other’s dignity with an imperative concern for the dignity agents attribute to their own lives as meaningful. In locating notions of dignity and meaning under the umbrella of “moral and spiritual intuitions” Taylor bumps up against what he terms the “affirmation of ordinary life”. Taylor discusses how the rise of

the “affirmation of ordinary life” in the west coincided with the development of an increasingly atomistic and utilitarian concept of human agency.

The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of what were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilization. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life in this sense is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of ordinary life therefore involves a polemical stance towards these traditional views with their implied elitism. This was true of the Reformation theologies, which are the main source of the drive to this affirmation in modern times.

It is this polemical stance, carried over and transposed in secular guise, which powers the reductive views like utilitarianism which want to denounce all qualitative distinctions. They are all accused, just as the honour ethic or the monastic ethic of supererogation was earlier, of wrongly and perversely downgrading ordinary life, of failing to see that our destiny lies here in production and reproduction and not in some alleged higher sphere, of being blind to the dignity and worth of ordinary human desire and fulfillment. (Taylor 1989b, 23)

#### On the “Affirmation of Ordinary Life”

Does this passage reveal Taylor’s real ambitions? Is he an inveterate elitist? Does he yearn for the re-enchantment of the universe, and the restoration of philosophers such as himself, to the esteem of those living the “incomparably higher” life of reflection? Not quite. Taylor is no Neo-Romantic. His sympathies rest somewhere in between what he sees as the “great intra-mural divide” in modern western thought. Taylor plainly values the intellectual liberation from the fatalistic worldview indigenous to pre-Enlightenment cosmology. Further, a central component of Taylor’s project involves the development of a practical model for moral reasoning. The dominant place which reason occupies in Taylor’s theory is, in itself, adequate proof that Taylor is not seeking to provoke a new age of *Sturm und Drang*. Indeed, Taylor’s work in *Sources* may even be described as helping agents to articulate “the worth of ordinary human desire and fulfillment” as powerful moral sources.

So then, we might ask, if Taylor values “the worth of ordinary human desire and fulfillment” why is he critical of the “affirmation of ordinary life”? At the heart of Taylor’s critique of the “affirmation of ordinary life” is the renunciation of “qualitative distinction” it involves. In “reducing” dignity to a utilitarian valuation of the “life of production and reproduction, of work and the family” Taylor believes that the “affirmation of ordinary life, while necessarily denouncing certain distinctions, itself amounts to one; else it has no meaning at all” (ibid). Taylor’s resistance to the “affirmation of ordinary life” is not based on a sentimental view of pre-modern hierarchy. Rather, it is rooted in the way that such an “affirmation” limits the possible sources of dignity to a utilitarian measure of one’s “*manner of living* ordinary life” (ibid). The naturalist sense of dignity espoused in the “affirmation of ordinary life” is completely at odds with Taylor’s moral theory; wherein a variety of “qualitative distinctions” are evinced by agents spelling out “what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner” (Taylor 1989b, 26).

Taylor’s critique of the “affirmation of ordinary life” is, ultimately, one front in his campaign against the various forms of disengaged rationalism and utilitarianism spawned in the west by figures such as Claude Adrien Helvétius, Denis Diderot, Holbach, Jeremy Bentham *et al.* Indeed, Taylor devotes chapter nineteen in the fourth part of *Sources* to a historical critique of the emergence of the naturalist philosophical worldviews which fuelled the radical Enlightenment. In this section of *Sources*, Taylor lays bare his disdain for the intellectual foundations of contemporary forms of disengaged reason established through theories native to the radical Enlightenment, such as

utilitarianism, as well as what he deigns the modern ideological descendants of materialist orthodoxy, such as Marxism. Taylor charges that these philosophies are polemical through and through, and that their tautological nature renders them intellectually “parasitic” (Taylor 1989b, 339).

Yet, as vehement as Taylor’s critique of the utilitarian and disengaged models of reasoning and agency may be, he never loses sight of the profound intellectual progress which Enlightenment thought made possible. In *Hegel*, Taylor lauds the freedom which emerged from the Enlightenment’s initial usurpation of reified *ancien régime* power structures, built upon the lottery of hierarchical birth and the exploitation inherent in rigid custom. It is evident that Taylor appreciates the social, political and intellectual progress made possible under the banner of Enlightenment thinking. However, his appreciation is tempered by a keen awareness of the loss of the common horizons of meaning within which agents had oriented themselves toward ideals of the good appropriate to their social and spiritual stations (Taylor 1989b, 26).

Here we begin to approach the core of Taylor’s mission of retrieval in *Sources*. In overthrowing the pre-modern paradigm of teleological thought, Taylor believes an integral aspect of human agency was lost. In Taylor’s moral theory agents orient themselves in the space of moral questions about what it is good to be through qualitative distinctions regarding which goods are most morally compelling. Following Taylor, the frameworks which emerge based upon the distinctions made between moral goods by agents are not arbitrary. Taylor argues that the goods which agents find most compelling are those which empower them as moral agents. Following Taylor, agents do not orient

themselves in the space of moral questions based upon disengaged reflection, nor are agents free to simply “do without frameworks altogether” (ibid).

In *Sources*, Taylor details how pre-modern moral frameworks were consigned to the rubbish bin of western thought by what he calls the “reductive thesis” of naturalism. It must be noted that Taylor does not lament the loss of the superstitious, or classist content of pre-modern moral frameworks. Rather, Taylor feels that the wholesale de-legitimation of moral frameworks *tout court* has led to the suppression of a basic dimension of moral agency; the relationship between “identity and the good”.

#### On the “Reductive Thesis”

The “reductive thesis” which Taylor identifies as the cause of this suppression is a facet of the (bad) epistemology of naturalism. According to Taylor, the “reductive thesis” rejects claims about moral ontology on an empirical basis (Taylor 1989b, 19). Taylor portrays the naturalists as subscribing to a, putatively, pure utilitarian view. The general principle of this utilitarian view consists of the belief that moral actions and reactions can be calculated through disengaged reasoning. In this utilitarian model, the power to act morally is tied to the power of disengaged agency. Thus, for the utilitarian, moral ideals (or in Taylor’s parlance goods) exert no power *vis à vis* agents; they are simply variables in an equation.

Taylor makes a point in *Sources* of first examining an *ad hominem* critique of the naturalists’ “reductive thesis”. Taylor points out that even a reductive worldview exists within a space of moral questions wherein ideas of what is good possess power. In the case of naturalism, the orienting ideals might be described as those of objectivity and disengaged agency. Taylor asserts that the “reductive thesis” is itself evidence of the way

that naturalists operate with a “sense of qualitative distinction” about what is worthwhile (Taylor 1989b, 21). However, Taylor is quick to elucidate how the “sense of qualitative distinctions” which agents use to orient themselves within the space of moral questions may be either “spelled out in a highly explicit way, in a philosophically formulated ontology or anthropology”, or commensurately, it may be so thoroughly sublimated as to appear as though the agents live without any framework whatsoever; a condition Taylor claims is “always untrue” (ibid).

As sharp as the *ad hominem* critique is, Taylor feels that it falls short in presenting how indispensable frameworks are for agents in their development and articulation of, robust moral identities. Taylor concludes that the *ad hominem* argument falls short by allowing for the potential that some individuals may do without frameworks all-together. If Taylor’s arguments are to overcome the naturalist “reductive thesis”, he must establish how frameworks are a necessarily universal feature of moral agency.

I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type, some superman of disengaged objectification. Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood. (Taylor 1989b, 27)

Taylor takes pains here to drive home the claim that frameworks are indispensable to “undamaged human personhood”. Taylor goes on to describe how the space of moral questions in which agents frameworks take shape is also the space within which agents measure their dignity through the reflective process of strong evaluation<sup>16</sup>. Weighing up

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<sup>16</sup> See chapter two pg. 81 of this dissertation for the description of strong evaluation.

of their sense of their lives as meaningful based on their proximity to their visions of what it is good to be.

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (ibid)

Taylor develops a picture of engaged agency, embedded in a definite moral ontology, wherein agents interact in a reciprocal fashion with moral goods through the exercise of practical reason and expressive articulation. Thus, moral goods only possess practical meaning in so far as human beings engage with and articulate them (Taylor 1989b, 58-59). Conversely, the vigor of a given agent's moral identity depends upon the extent to which said agent acknowledges, reflects upon, and articulates the goods they identify as most empowering.

In his essay "Taylor, "History," and the History of Philosophy" Terry Pinkard provides an excellent synopsis of the "realism" which characterizes the relationship between moral goods and rational reflection in Taylor's moral theory. Pinkard describes Taylor's view that "The goods toward which we orient ourselves are real, even if they depend on the existence of humans for them to be goods; they are not mere projections that we force onto the world" (Pinkard 2004, 195). Pinkard goes on to illustrate how, for Taylor, reasoning about these goods is an ongoing process. "To incorporate those goods into our ways of living, moreover, means that we must reason about them. We must see to what else such an incorporation commits us (or to what else it inclines us or for which it offers additional motivation), and we are often thereby called to evaluate and reevaluate that orientation as it is being lived out" (Pinkard 2004, 196).

Pinkard helps us to understand that while frameworks are essential elements in Taylor's moral theory, they are not to be treated as static in and of themselves. The ongoing "evaluation and reevaluation" of the place of goods within the frameworks that orient us in the space of moral questions, is part and parcel of Taylor's model of practical reasoning and engaged agency. Taylor's rendering of moral agency evinces a strong self-determining character. Taylor paints a much more involved portrait of moral agency than does the utilitarian model advanced in philosophical naturalism. In *Sources*, Taylor advances a model of moral agency which balances moral realism with practical reasoning.

Understanding Taylor's thesis concerning the essential role which frameworks play in helping agents navigate the space of moral questions regarding what it is good to be, is crucial for illuminating Taylor's concern for a healthy, dignified model of moral identity development. Taylor believes that frameworks constitute a fundamental dimension for the development of coherent moral identities, and that the naturalist "reductive thesis" which denies the legitimacy of frameworks can lead agents into the throes of an "identity crisis" (Taylor 1989b, 27). Following Taylor, any attempt to forego frameworks would necessarily set agents upon a "painful and frightening experience" (Taylor 1989b, 28). It would do damage to their "personhood" (Taylor 1989b, 27). A symptom of this damage is apparent in the modern misapprehension of dignity rooted in the naturalist idealization of the power of disengaged reasoning. *Contra* the naturalist concept of a dignified, disengaged agent, Taylor claims that dignity is derived from the strength of our engagement with our frameworks which allow us to know "where we stand" in the space of moral questions (ibid).



Taylor's claim here hinges upon the acceptance that the space of moral questions and the frameworks we use to navigate it are "ontologically basic" (Taylor 1989b, 29). In this instance, it is helpful to turn toward a Heideggerian interpretation of Taylor's moral ontology. Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) signifies agents finding themselves thrown into situations without any *a priori* understanding of their circumstances (Heidegger 2010, 131). This element of Heidegger's theory helps to clarify Taylor's notion of embeddedness. I argue that in Taylor's moral theory, agency begins in a state of thrownness, and that the condition of being thrown into the space of moral questions is what kick-starts practical reasoning. Further, I contend that for Taylor this represents a universal condition.

One orients oneself in a space which exists independently of one's success or failure in finding one's bearings, which moreover, makes the task of finding these bearings inescapable." (Taylor 1989b, 30)

The universalizing tone of Taylor's assertion regarding the inescapability of having to find one's "bearings" in the space of moral questions, coupled with our review of some of the basic tenets of his moral theory (i.e. frameworks, qualitative distinctions, etc.), evinces what Taylor describes as an account of identity that is "not only a phenomenological account but an exploration of the limits of the conceivable in human life, an account of its 'transcendental conditions'" (Taylor 1989b, 32). In light of this statement we can surmise that Taylor's phenomenological/transcendental account of identity rests upon the supposition of our existing in an inescapable space of moral questions (ibid). Further, we can deduce that dignity in this model of identity depends in part upon the clarity of the frameworks we develop for reasoning about what it is good to

be. But what does this process of engaged “practical reasoning” look like? And what about it is particularly moral?

The character of the “practical reasoning” central to Taylor’s moral theory can be elucidated through a consideration of what I have termed Taylor’s transitional epistemology.<sup>17</sup> Taylor insists that “The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we *are*, because we are always also changing and *becoming*” (Taylor 1989b, 46-47). If we combine this claim with his description in his essay “Explanation and Practical Reason”, regarding how agents can adjudicate what constitutes an advance in understanding, a “gain” in knowledge, without relying upon the naturalist representational paradigm; we can begin to sketch the outlines of Taylor’s “practical reasoning”.

What I want to take from this is the notion that we can sometimes arbitrate between positions by portraying *transitions* as gains or losses, even where what we normally understand as decision through criteria- qua externally defined standards- is impossible. (Taylor 1995, 42)

Taylor’s notion of arbitrating “between positions” speaks directly to his concept of agents weighing goods in the space of moral questions. Further, Taylor’s assertion that agents understand this arbitration according to a rubric of “gains” and “losses”, leading to an “advance in knowledge” (ibid), evinces how “practical reasoning” is reasoning through transitions. However, I contend that what makes these transitions morally important in Taylor’s theory is their articulation.

In another of his essays, “Heidegger, Language, and Ecology”, Taylor undertakes a discussion of the philosophical history of expression with an eye toward demonstrating what was so radical about Heidegger’s thoughts on the subject. I believe that Taylor’s

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<sup>17</sup> See chapter two pgs. 83-85 of this dissertation for my introduction of transitional epistemology.

esteem for Heidegger's conception of expression bolsters my argument regarding the relationship between a transitional epistemology and articulation underlying Taylor's model of "practical reasoning".

Through language, a world is disclosed; a world in which features are located, which is also a locus of strong goods, of objects of the specifically human emotions, and of human relations. (Taylor 1995, 120)

For Taylor, strong goods represent the beacons for our orientation in the space of moral questions. Further, the firmness of our stances in the space of moral questions is only as powerful as the clarity of our reflections upon, and articulations of, these goods. Taylor makes this point in his examination of self-narrative in *Sources*, wherein he ties agents' orientation in the space of moral questions to the notion of their understanding their lives as an "unfolding story" (Taylor 1989b, 47). In order to narrate this story agents depend upon reflection and articulation. However, the conduit between strong evaluation and articulation is not as binary as it may seem at first glance in Taylor's theory. Taylor places a great emphasis on the "human relations" which structure, shape, resist and continually inform our experiences as moral agents. To fully appreciate the significance of human relations in Taylor's theorization of moral identity development it is necessary to examine his notion of the modern self. It behooves us to add the historical descriptor "modern" in this instance, as Taylor has been very careful to contextualize his study as dealing with the modern concept of the self, while steering away from the portrayal of reflection as a unique attribute of modern agency. However, Taylor does insist that "Only in modern western culture have we begun to speak of the human person as "the self," and of people as having and being selves" (Taylor 1991a, 304).

What I am suggesting is that we see ourselves as selves, because our morally important self-descriptions push us in this direction or, alternatively, because we identify ourselves with this kind of description. (Taylor 1991a, 305)

This *genre* of self-description is, Taylor claims, unique to modernity. As demonstrated above, Taylor presents the notion of an identity unencumbered by a fatalistic teleology as a unique development of post-Enlightenment languages. Taylor reveres the ways in which our modern languages of self-description express freedom from social, political and theological determinism. For Taylor, this freedom is integral to understanding the ongoing process of agents' transitional movements toward increasingly lucid accounts of the strong goods empowering their moral identities. What begins to emerge here are the contours of Taylor's moral theory as unique to modernity. Taylor's concern with the ties that bind language and articulation to the background of moral experience, and the power of agents to construct frameworks within which to orient themselves in the space of moral questions, depends upon the modern western way of speaking of the "human person as "the self," and of people as having and being selves" (Taylor 1991a, 304).

#### On the Importance of Conversation

There is another crucial characteristic of Taylor's vision of the modern self which sets it apart from both pre-modern deterministic models of agency, and the radically disengaged agent envisioned by modern philosophical naturalists. This facet of the self is best elucidated in the title of an essay from which the two short passages above are drawn; "The Dialogical Self". In this essay Taylor makes the statement that "Human beings are constituted in conversation" (Taylor 1991a, 314). Taylor also invokes the work of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in calling for an understanding of language

adequate to a description of the way in which the self partly arises in conversation.

Without diverging too far from our discussion of Taylor's theory proper, I believe it helpful to try and parse out what Taylor found so important in Bakhtin's ruminations on language.

In an essay entitled "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin champions the modern multi-vocal novel as an authentic style of poetic expression *contra* the exclusive dominance of the univocal expression of classical poetry. Bakhtin proffers the novel as a model of modern, pluralistic expression "multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin 1981, 261). This model contrasts sharply with the idealized terrain of the pre-modern epic poem which speaks with a singular teleological voice. In arguing against the parochial unity of the pre-modern, epic voice, Bakhtin develops the trope of "heteroglossia". Bakhtin's aim in using the term "heteroglossia" is to convey a sense of the unlimited diversity of meanings at play in the linguistic background against which we frame our social and cultural experience. Bakhtin does not deny that quotidian life requires linguistic stability. However, Bakhtin asserts that the stability of meanings is limited to their historical manifestation in dialogue, thus rendering them always susceptible to change. This view resonates strongly with aspects of Taylor's notion of articulation.

In his essay, Bakhtin describes how the dialogues presented in the novel are always built upon the ideological and linguistic character of their set period. Thus, a "unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence posited [*zadan*] — and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981, 270). This evinces how coherency is as finite as those human beings who

struggle to achieve and maintain its auspices. The contention that the de-fault state of language is heteroglossic usurps the ahistorical tone of the pre-modern epic and the essentialism of its governing metaphysic. The assertion that our purchase upon coherency is fleeting, and our norms and conventions destined to be consigned to the category of the antiquated and incoherent, confronts us with what Bakhtin identifies as the “processes of decentralization and disunification” integral to the idea of “living language” (Bakhtin 1981, 272).

The vitality inherent in Bakhtin’s description of language as a living force, helps to illuminate what we encounter in Taylor’s description of the importance of articulation. For Bakhtin “responsive understanding is a fundamental force” (Bakhtin 1981, 280). Thus, we can infer that articulation depends upon active, engaged, attention and response. Passive understanding leads to dialogic stagnation, as it only absorbs the “utterance”, without helping contribute to the elucidation of “background” understanding. Taylor suggests that the self is constituted, partly, in conversation, Bakhtin shows us how.

Bakhtin’s emphasis upon engaged articulation and the threat of stagnation resonates strongly with Taylor’s fretting about the malaise of modernity, and its roots in the torpor inherent in the naturalist model of disengaged agency. Bakhtin’s concept of discourse hinges upon the idea that exchange necessarily involves borrowing. Further, the second syllable in ex-change gains importance as that which is borrowed is always then changed. Using the novel as the stage for playing this out, Bakhtin describes how “The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions” (Bakhtin 1981, 299-300). The notion of “social intentions” resonates with the idea of a “background” against which our

claims gain, or diminish, in coherency. While Bakhtin champions the strong sense of our language being pregnant with meanings not native to our own self-consciousness, he does not set discourse in a vacuum. What prevents reification in Bakhtin's theory is his emphasis on change. The novelist, a uniquely modern figure, engages in a hermeneutic of dialogical action. They articulate their own account against the background of other accounts, while simultaneously borrowing from those other accounts to shape their own.

Bakhtin usurps the metaphysical stability of an idealized epic language with the dissonance of heteroglossia. Yet, he does not condemn us to the fate of Babel, forever confounded in the face of our multi-vocal reality. Rather, the dynamic nature of his pluralistic model prevents the exhaustion of metaphors and the instantiation of ultimate truths, endemic to totalizing metaphysical models. Bakhtin makes it quite clear that discourse is always beset by tensions that resist final consensus. Bakhtin describes how the "prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility" (Bakhtin 1981, 331). Bakhtin's description here disrupts both the telos of the pre-modern epic, as well as the disengaged ethos of naturalist reasoning.

The allure of Bakhtin, for Taylor, rests in Bakhtin's depiction of subjects as continuously engaged in a constitutive practice involving the articulation of visions of meaning drawn from a diffuse and undefined background. Bakhtin's influence upon Taylor's description of the importance of human relations and conversation for the development of moral identity, is strongly evinced in Taylor's argument regarding "webs of interlocution." Here Taylor attacks the atomism he believes central to the naturalists'

representational epistemology. Taylor does not mention Bakhtin in laying out his case for the necessity of inter-relation in the constitution of the self. Nevertheless, I argue that Bakhtin's sentiments regarding "living language" can be discerned coursing just beneath the surface of Taylor's assertion that "I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s)" (Taylor 1989b, 36).

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding—and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'. (ibid)

Taylor advances the notion of the dialogical self in other works as well. In *The Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor develops a highly lucid description of how agents acquire the necessary language to construct identities through a process of exchange which, for Taylor, represents a fundamental aspect of being human (Taylor 1991b, 32-33). In stressing the nuanced and subtle spiritual and moral power of expressive language, and its constitutive place in the emergence of the self in conversation, Taylor builds a very different model of the necessity of interlocution from any found in the social sciences. In his essay "The Dialogical Self" Taylor dismisses the dialectical picture which frames a social scientific view of exchange as a legacy of George Herbert Mead's "very impoverished behaviorist ontology...[which] seemed to be a brilliant way to make room for something like reflexivity while remaining within the austere bounds of a scientific approach" (Taylor 1991a, 312). Taylor's notion of the constitutive necessity of interlocution for the development of identity differs from that of the behavioral model in another important fashion. Alongside the importance which Taylor places upon our ongoing relationships with others, (i.e. parents, friends, lovers, *et al.*) in the continuing



process of identity development, he includes relationships with “non-human” goods. Taylor also extends the bounds of what we consider legitimate sources of interlocution outside of the “given historical community” (Taylor 1989b, 37).

In *Sources*, Taylor places significant importance upon the way in which agents learn “languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up” (Taylor 1989b, 35). Taylor also asserts that the moral and spiritual meanings conveyed through language are only comprehensible in the “common space” of conversation (ibid). Here Taylor is reiterating Wittgenstein’s familiar dictum regarding the impossibility of private languages. However, Taylor apprehends identity as dialogical in two dimensions, one based upon the agent’s orientation to strong goods, and the other rooted in the agent’s position within a “language community” (Taylor 1989b, 36). These dimensions are inseparable in Taylor’s reckoning, and form the background against which agents understand themselves and their world through the “transcendental condition of interlocution” (Taylor 1989b, 38-39). Taylor’s description of the embedded character of all agents in “language communities”, with attendant historically and culturally particular vocabularies, is not a new revelation.

#### On the “Sovereignty of the Good”

As I discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Ludwig Wittgenstein undertook a much more sophisticated investigation of language along the same lines decades earlier, and Taylor readily acknowledges Wittgenstein as a major influence upon his own ideas about language and community (Taylor 1989b, 38). However, Taylor’s inclusion of agents’ engagement with strong goods as an integral aspect of identity development and articulation, adds a different element to the role of language in his

moral theory, and thus, requires some elaboration. Fergus Kerr undertook a probing examination of the role which goods play in Taylor's moral philosophy in his essay "The Self and the Good: Taylor's Moral Ontology".

In the introduction to his essay Kerr juxtaposes Taylor's project with the movement within analytic philosophy in Oxford in the 1950's which sought to re-envision an ethical paradigm harkening back to that of the Greeks, seeking to act as a bulwark against both "Kantian deontology" and "utilitarianism" (Kerr 2004, 84). Kerr attributes this quest to a group of female philosophers with whom Taylor would have been well acquainted; his supervisor at Oxford G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch, whose notion of the good Taylor discusses at key points in "Identity and the Good". It is evident that Taylor shares this group's concern with the predominance of naturalist epistemology in western thought, if not their quest to return to Platonic or Aristotelian ethics. "That is to say, he wants to open up a nonanthropocentric perspective on the good, to allow us to see the "sovereignty of the good" over the moral agent" (ibid). Kerr's turn of Murdoch's phrase "the sovereignty of the good" in describing just how radical a departure Taylor's notion of the good is from the naturalist paradigm, is important. Murdoch's influence upon Taylor should not be underestimated. Although Taylor does acknowledge his debt to Murdoch in a note (Taylor 1989b, 534), his limited discussion of her actual theory in *Sources* belies her importance to his work.

Iris Murdoch's short, yet provocative monograph, entitled *The Sovereignty of Good* which appeared in 1970 presses a neo-Platonic argument for the apprehension of a "general metaphysical background to morals" (Murdoch 1970, 42). Like Taylor, Murdoch is a moral realist in the strong sense of goods commanding the love and respect

of human beings. Unlike Taylor, however, Murdoch is an avowed disciple of Plato and makes no bones about her philosophy flying the “banner” of the classic Greek schema of metaphysics. Much like Taylor, Murdoch invokes religious vocabulary in her discussion of a substantive approach to moral discourse, floating the metaphor of secular prayer as a mode of giving attention to the love of the good, in the way that religious prayer focuses upon an expression of a love of god (Murdoch 1970, 55). However, to really grasp the influence which Murdoch’s work has had upon Taylor’s thinking, we must examine Murdoch’s critique of the superficiality of the picture which naturalist thinking paints of disengaged agency, and her own emphasis upon the necessity of re-discovering the inner dimension of moral feeling. Murdoch advances a concise and extremely lucid description of the naturalist epistemology wherein “There is only outward activity, ergo only outward moral activity, and what we call inward activity is merely the shadow of this cast back into the mind” (Murdoch 1970, 21). Murdoch follows this with the biting rhetorical “why worry? As Kant said, what we are commanded to do is to love our neighbor in a practical and not a pathological sense” (ibid). Murdoch then goes on to point out why she finds this attitude so disturbing.

This is one of those exasperating moments in philosophy when one seems to be being relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say. (ibid)

Murdoch’s arguments foreshadow Taylor’s assertion that moderns live in the pall of an insidious moral *malaise*. This is most keenly felt when reading Murdoch’s assertion that the “newspeak” of “modern ethics” exiles the expression of certain values from the field of reasonable moral discourse (Murdoch 1970, 2). Here, Murdoch alludes to the incoherence which expressions of the love for the good, or in Platonic terms, the love of

the ideas, encounter in contemporary naturalist philosophy. When Murdoch cites the focus upon the practical duty to treat the neighbor ethically as a matter of will derived from moral law, she highlights the style of procedural reasoning which pervades much of modern moral discourse in the west. Further, Murdoch's statement that the conventions of modern philosophical discourse prevent agents from saying what they are "irresistibly impelled to say", resonates with a claim Taylor makes in *Sources* regarding the indispensability of certain terms in agents' articulations.

What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives? 'Making the best sense' here includes not only offering the best, most realistic orientation about the good but also allowing us best to understand and make sense of the actions and feelings of ourselves and others. For our language of deliberation is continuous with our language of assessment, and this with the language in which we explain what people do and feel. (Taylor 1989b, 57)

This passage from *Sources* also evinces aspects of what I have been arguing should be understood as Taylor's transitional epistemology. Taylor refers to the "critical reflection" of terms used for describing one's vision of the good, as well as the "correction of the errors" which may obfuscate one's orientation to strong goods in the space of moral questions. Here Taylor is picking up on Murdoch's emphasis upon the inner dimension of morality, to which he adds a mode of practical reasoning which allows for the refinement of moral feelings and their articulation in a coherent narrative structure, the "best account".

I argue that what lies at the heart of Murdoch's and Taylor's respective projects is a powerful desire to redress what they apprehend to be the damage done to a holistic sense of moral agency via the naturalist rejection of an essential concern for the care of the soul, (or in Taylorian terms, the self) in contemporary western philosophy. The sense

is that the naturalist model of disengaged agency has obscured the connections between agents and the goods that command their love and attention. Murdoch hoped that her critique of the superficiality endemic to “modern ethics”, and her retrieval of the inner modes of moral feeling, would re-enliven a philosophical view which communicates “the energy and passion of the soul in its search for the good, the force that joins us to the world through good” (Murdoch 1970, 102).

Murdoch’s portrayal of the good as a sovereign force commanding the allegiance of subjects, along with her insistence that the inner dimension of morality must be re-introduced to contemporary moral philosophy, resounds in Taylor’s tone throughout *Sources*. The retrieval of a vocabulary capable of taking account of the inner dimension of morality, and the link which such a reflective exercise has with the care of the self, is particularly important for Taylor’s model of the development of moral identity in *Sources*. Although Taylor cannot follow Murdoch in her unwavering commitment to a Platonic metaphysical worldview, he does draw upon her picture of the inner dimension of moral agency in developing a unique notion of moral authenticity as a legitimate concern of the self. The self Taylor envisions is capable of submitting her moral intuitions to the strong evaluation of rational reflection and engaging in the continual refinement, and articulation, of the strong goods which help them to take a dignified and meaningful stance in the space of moral questions. This echoes in some respects Murdoch’s argument regarding unified moral agency.

As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection. Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision.

(Murdoch 1970, 40)

This passage suggests that Murdoch is attempting to tread the same middle path between the sentimental indulgence of Romanticism, and the absolutist rationalism of the Radical Enlightenment, that Taylor seeks to navigate in *Sources*. Like Taylor, Murdoch does not see human beings as disengaged minds with morality added, dependent on context. However, for all that Taylor shares with Murdoch, there are important ways in which Taylor diverges from Murdoch's vision. I have already mentioned Taylor's eschewing the *genre* of Platonic metaphysics against which Murdoch builds her arguments (Taylor 1989b, 96). However, the crucial difference between Taylor's model of moral agency and that of Murdoch's is Taylor's adamancy regarding the necessity of agents articulating authentic accounts of moral identity. For her part, Murdoch only invokes authenticity as one example of the sovereign concepts which modern philosophy foists upon moral language in abeyance of a substantive discussion of virtues (Murdoch 1970, 58). Indeed, Murdoch's attitude toward the use of the term authenticity in modern moral discourse is indicative of what Taylor contends is a misapprehension of its importance in developing a modern ethos. Taylor thought the misunderstanding of authenticity so dire that he devoted his Massey lectures to addressing what he feels is the confusion around the ethics of authenticity and the role this confusion plays in what he claims is the *malaise* of modernity.

As discussed earlier, these lectures led to the publication of *The Ethics of Authenticity* wherein Taylor's stated aim is the investigation of what he claims are the feelings of "loss" which haunt modern subjects in the west (Taylor 1991b, 1). Taylor traces the sense of loss, or malaise, to what he terms the "narrowing" of meaning, whereby the "heroic" social standards of pre-modern idealism gave way to an atomistic

pre-occupation with the individual, “a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society” (Taylor 1991b, 4).

Taylor claims that the anxiety over this “narrowing” has been exacerbated in the latter half of the twentieth-century. Taylor diagnoses three malaises as afflicting moderns. The first malaise Taylor presents is that of individualism and the commensurate feeling of a parochial, narcissistic self-regard. To this he adds the disenchantment of the human cosmos and the rise of instrumental reason (ibid), and finally, the predominance of what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “tutelary power” of the state and the decline of citizen oversight and involvement in the governing of their own affairs (Taylor 1991b, 9). For the purposes of the work at hand, I will concentrate on the first malaise as it represents the prime moral pathology which Taylor is attempting to redress in *Sources*. Further, the malaise of radical individualism is by far the most well elucidated of the three malaises Taylor diagnoses, and is the one most directly connected to his interest in authenticity.

Taylor sets out to unwind what he feels to be the confusion surrounding authenticity in modern discourse by examining the contemporary school of cultural critics, represented by authors such as Allan Bloom, who attack the “facile relativism” they perceive as endemic among contemporary subjects (Taylor 1991b, 13-14). Taylor lays out the moral topography underlying what Bloom and others reckon to be a vapid worldview based upon the idiom “to each, their own”.

In other words, the relativism was itself an offshoot of a form of individualism, whose principle is something like this: everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfilment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance,

determine for him-or herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content.  
(Taylor 1991b, 14)

What emerges from Taylor's description here is a sense of existential libertarianism. Taylor confesses that he is not all-together unsympathetic to the critique of the modern valorization of self-fulfilment. However, he cannot follow critics like Bell in an outright denunciation of contemporary moral culture. Taylor argues that secreted within the modern fetishization of individualism resides a "powerful moral ideal". The ideal which Taylor discerns as exercising an animating force within the modern expression of individualism (an expression Taylor acknowledges may be "debased and travestied") is the ideal of authenticity (Taylor 1991b, 15). Taylor is quite specific about what sort of authenticity he is invoking. Taylor cites Lionel Trilling's description of authenticity as a concept indigenous to modernity, in differentiation to the more classic concept of sincerity, in his appropriately titled book *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Taylor 1991b, 15-16). Further, Taylor explicitly defines for us what he intends in using the term, moral ideal. The passage should be familiar to readers as I employed it in the heading of the last chapter, and in light of our study of Taylor's philosophical orientation, I feel it now bears repeating.

What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean 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. (Taylor 1991b, 16)

#### On Sincerity and Authenticity

Here we are provided a snapshot of Taylor's whole moral theory. Taylor believes that through attentiveness to our moral intuitions, and our subsequently putting those intuitions under the rational reflective lens of strong evaluation, we can move toward a



“better” understanding of ourselves as moral agents. The first step upon this road, according to Taylor, rests in acknowledging the claim which certain goods make upon us as moral agents. In this we can begin to understand what Taylor has in mind when he describes “a standard of what we ought to desire” (ibid). By engaging in this quest, Taylor asserts that subjects can move toward an increasingly more authentic moral identity; a more authentic understanding of self. The conduit for authenticity, according to Taylor, is articulation. Taylor asserts that it is only through articulation that our self-understandings gain moral force. Taylor is careful to note that he apprehends articulation to be an ongoing task, and a task which can only be performed amongst other selves (Taylor 1989b, 34-35).

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. And as has been widely discussed, these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer... But the self's interpretations can never be fully explicit. Full articulacy is an impossibility. The language we have come to accept articulates the issues of the good for us. But we cannot have fully articulated what we are taking as given, what we are simply counting with, in using this language. We can, of course, try to increase our understanding of what is implicit in our moral and evaluative languages. (Taylor 1989b, 34)

Taylor's almost casual suggestion that we can “try to increase our understanding of what is implicit in our moral and evaluative languages” belies the tremendous weight that this epistemic effort bears within his moral philosophy. In his essay “Overcoming Epistemology”, Taylor tendered just such a critical, reflective effort as an alternative to the (bad) epistemology of naturalist philosophy (Taylor 1995, 14). Taylor reiterates this stance in another of his essays, “Explanation and Practical Reason” (also discussed

earlier) wherein he described how gains in understanding can be represented as transitions (Taylor 1995, 42). It is my contention that Taylor's interpretation of authenticity fits hand in glove with his notion of transitioning toward better understandings of the good. To wit, Taylor's assertion above, that, "What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me" (Taylor 1989b, 34), becomes discernible as the progressive transition toward a more authentic moral identity through "self-interpretation".

Taylor's desire to develop a lucid description of authenticity as a substantive moral ideal, a description capable of combatting both the shallowness of atomistic self-fulfilment, as well as the outright dismissal of critics such as Bloom, is evident in the conclusion of *Sources*. In the last few pages of *Sources* Taylor begins to rehearse the argument which came to full fruition two years later in his Massey Lectures. In his concluding remarks in *Sources* regarding "The Conflicts of Modernity", Taylor briefly touches upon the contemporary cult of self-fulfilment and its roots within Romantic expressivism, by way of American Transcendentalism. However, while pointing out the myopic focus upon subjective values such an attitude may endorse, Taylor cautions that a concomitant rejection of "self-realization" would be unnecessarily hasty, and perhaps damaging, to a holistic sense of moral identity. Taylor premises this cautiousness upon the argument that "our normal understanding of self-realization 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 a fulfilling life needs" (Taylor 1989b, 507).

In *The Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor continues to tread carefully between advancing authenticity as a moral ideal integral for understanding the topography of modern moral identity development, while commensurately distinguishing between self-realization and self-fulfillment. Taylor devotes an important note<sup>18</sup> in *The Ethics of Authenticity* to an elaboration of the distinction between the readings of individualism as, on one hand, a “moral ideal”, and on the other an “amoral phenomenon” (Taylor 1991b, 125-126).

Taylor’s citing of Trilling’s take on authenticity from *Sincerity and Authenticity* as helpful for his own work in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Taylor 1991b, 15), makes a brief examination of Trilling’s discussion relevant. Taylor places a great onus upon the potential moral idealism nascent in the modern emergence of individualism, over and above the atomistic manifestation of various “amoral” versions of radical individualism. Trilling’s presentation of sincerity *contre* authenticity offers us a clue as to how Taylor discerns between the two potentialities resting within individualism.

Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic. (Trilling 1971, 11)

Trilling’s portrayal of sincerity bears the hallmarks of a *genre* of procedural behaviorism governed by utilitarian concerns. This represents a combination Taylor apprehends as the root cause of so much of modern *malaise*. To align one’s identity and actions with societal demands that we be perceived as “sincere”, and to follow a style of role-playing as “the most efficacious way of satisfying” said demand, risks what Taylor

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<sup>18</sup> Note 17

refers to as “mutilation” of the self (Taylor 1989b, 520-521). Trilling casts sincerity as playing to the audience of society. For Taylor such an act would require the repressing, or repudiation, of any strongly intuited goods which did not coincide with the given parameters of societal mores. In *Sources*, Taylor employs the trope of “selective blindness” to describe what he contends to be our “stifling” of “some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived” in a bid to conform to societal standards (Taylor 1989b, 520). Taylor concludes that the toll upon moral subjects of denying strongly felt moral goods is akin to an act of “mutilation”.

We have read so many goods out of our official story, we have buried their power so deep beneath layers of philosophical rationale, that they are in danger of stifling. Or rather, since they are our goods, human goods, *we* are stifling. (ibid)

Taylor’s claim here is that to stifle the goods we intuit as integral to our vision of living a good life, is tantamount to stifling ourselves as human beings. Turning once again to Lionel Trilling’s discussion in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, we can determine how Taylor’s interpretation of authenticity as a moral ideal, an ideal geared toward “self-realization”, is viewed by Taylor as a way out of the *malaise* of modernity caused by the stifling of our powerful moral sources and authentic self-understanding.

The word ‘authenticity’ comes so readily to the tongue these days and in so many connections that it may very well resist such efforts of definition as I shall later make, but I think that for the present, I can rely on its suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’ does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life. (Trilling 1971, 11)

Taylor, like Trilling allows that authenticity may be defined in many ways. Yet, they both include within their descriptions of authenticity, a strong moral component. Trilling’s suggestion of a “strenuous moral experience” meshes well with Taylor’s claim

that “authenticity points us towards a more self-responsible form of life. It allows us to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own” (Taylor 1991b, 74). Taylor acknowledges the potential pitfall that lurks within the ethic of authenticity, wherein one may easily fall into the amoral self-fulfillment of radical individualism. Yet, Taylor persists in arguing that the risk is worth it. That we must not defer to the convenient dismissal of authenticity as disguised relativism, but instead engage in the “work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal” (Taylor 1991b, 72).

#### On Retrieval

The trope of retrieval is a favourite of Taylor’s. It appears in several of his various works, and as noted earlier, it is invoked to characterize an “important element” in *Sources* (Taylor 1989b, 4). Just how important an element the “work of retrieval” constitutes in *Sources* is not apparent until the outline I have been drawing of Taylor’s moral theory comes more fully into view. As I have demonstrated, Taylor’s moral theory depends upon powerful connections established through the strong (rational) evaluation of intuited moral goods, allowing for the construction of frameworks within which agents orient themselves toward increasingly proximal positions relative to the horizons of their visions of the good life. The movement of agents within the space of moral questions is accomplished through transitions from less lucid to more lucid understandings of the goods which command their love and respect (Taylor 1989b, 78). The imperative to engage in such a “work of retrieval” only makes sense, of course, if one is sympathetic to Taylor’s diagnosis of *malaise*.

The intention of this work was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation—and thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit. (Taylor 1989b, 520)

In an essay entitled “The Person”, Taylor states in the course of a discussion of the linguistic dimension of significance and the establishment of standards that, “The standard needs to be focused in language” (Taylor, 1985a, 272). What is included in such a “focusing” in language is helpfully elaborated by Fergus Kerr as “the kind of personal recognition of some good for human beings which springs from some other than purely human source, for which Taylor has been arguing all along, has to be spelled out in instances of ordinary everyday discriminations” (Kerr 2004, 102). Thus, following Taylor, the power of goods as beacons for orienting our(selves) within the space of moral questions depends upon the degree to which we, as moral agents, articulate the meanings we intuit as made manifest through our acknowledgement of the significance they have for us; “The central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power” (Taylor 1989b, 92).

Using Bernard Williams’ examination of value terms from his work *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* as a jumping off point, Taylor describes, in *Sources*, the ways in which “descriptive meaning” is inextricably bound up with “evaluation” in our understanding of value terms. Taylor’s argument asserts that the background against which our value statements make sense requires a combination of both the “descriptive meaning” commensurable within the “webs of interlocution” which form our “language communities”, along with individual “qualitative discriminations” derived from the process of “strong evaluation” determining the importance of a given value/ideal within the hierarchy of goods upon which each self’s moral identity is built (Taylor 1989b, 54).

The facet of Taylor's value/ language argument which takes it from slightly unconventional to groundbreaking, rests in his portrayal of individual "qualitative discriminations" as based upon real, non-anthropocentric moral standards which make claims upon us (Kerr 2004, 100). This formulation flies in the face of the dominant naturalist grammar in the west, which draws hard and fast boundaries between objective and subjective claims and statements. The theory of language which Taylor advances in *Sources* represents his most lucid and complete argument against the representationalist epistemology undergirding naturalist grammar. However, Taylor's argument regarding the descriptive/evaluative character of language is not only meant as a counter-measure to combat the alienating effects of contemporary naturalist languages which push utilitarian notions of morality; divorcing subjects from their own experiences and intuitions. Rather, Taylor's theory of descriptive/evaluative language is crucial for his larger theorization concerning the integral relationship between moral identity and articulation. A relationship which, I contend, hinges upon the "best account principle".

The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense is trumps. Let me call this the BA principle. (Taylor 1989b, 58)

Taylor's description of the "best account principle" encompasses crucial aspects of what I have been calling his transitional epistemology. Taylor asserts that a substantive account of moral identity requires terms commensurable across both "explanatory and life uses." Yet, he focuses upon the "terms indispensable for the latter", i.e. "life uses". I

contend that Taylor's concept of "life uses" pertains to self-narrative, "the story that makes best sense of us."

In "Identity and the Good" Taylor firmly establishes the inescapably shared dimension of language, including the condition that agency depends first and foremost upon the acquisition of language through the ongoing "conversation" into which we are born (Taylor 1989b, 35). However, with the introduction of his concept of the "best account principle", Taylor begins to hone his arguments down to a penetrating focus upon the connections between the good, language, and the self. Taylor hints at this turn, away from the public, and into the personal earlier on in *Sources* when, following his claim that agency depends upon our inauguration into an "ongoing conversation", he asserts that based upon the foundation of "common language", "I may develop an original way of understanding myself and human life, at least one which is in sharp disagreement with my family and background" (ibid). Taylor's recognition that individuals' accounts depend *a priori* upon a base in a "common language", which pre-exists their own articulations, allows Taylor to make his case for moral identity based upon a "search for clairvoyance [which] yields the best account we can give at any given time" (Taylor 1989b, 58), while remaining on the right side of Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of private languages.

In pointing out Taylor's shift from an examination of the descriptive and evaluative model of language to an increasing focus upon the connection between the evaluative mode of language and the development of individuals "best accounts" of moral identity, I am not trying to suggest that Taylor is hoodwinking the reader. After all, the title of Taylor's work is *Sources of the Self*, not sources of the community. As such, it



is entirely appropriate that Taylor refine his arguments to address the consequences which his theory heralds for our understanding of the development of the self. In formulating the “best account principle” Taylor manages to weave together all the various threads of his arguments concerning language, epistemology, the good, *malaise*, authenticity, and the self. Further, Taylor’s use of the term “clairvoyance” in relation to the development of a “best account” is particularly helpful for understanding how, what I have been calling Taylor’s transitional epistemology, allows agents in Taylor’s model to navigate these various threads.

Taylor’s concept of the “best account” is that of an always tentative and revisable articulation of an agent’s strongly evaluated orientation toward their vision of what it is good to be. As such, it depends upon a base in the “common language” of description. Yet, it also accords with a uniquely authentic individual acknowledgement of the goods which agents intuitively sense as being empowering. The revisable nature of the “best account” recognizes the role which practical reason plays, and the possibility that agents can always transition toward a better understanding of their relative position to their strongly valued goods in the space of moral questions. Finally, as implied in its title, the “best account” is an articulation which meets Taylor’s requirement that we make sense of our lives through narrative (Taylor 1989b, 47).

### On Empowerment

I contend an analysis of Taylor’s “best account principle” will evince how, in Taylorian theory, language plays a dual role in the development of moral identity. I have already established Taylor’s view of agency as founded within the “ongoing conversation”, and the “common language”, into which one is born. I will now

demonstrate how Taylor envisions the “evaluative” mode of language, composed of individual “best accounts”, as the means through which agents develop a robust sense of an authentic and dignified self. The differentiation here is between basic agency and the holistic sense of self venerated in Taylor’s moral theory. Following Taylor, the “best account principle” enables agents to refine their vision of the good through a process which includes intuitive, rational, and expressive elements. Through an adherence to the “best account principle” agents can transition toward progressively more “clairvoyant” understandings of the goods which command their deep respect, loyalty, and love.

Taylor’s model of “best account” allows agents to give increasingly sophisticated and clarified accounts which, at least partially, render their moral ideals more salient. The goods which previously lurked in the background are, through their articulation in a “best account”, brought to the forefront of agents’ understanding. When Taylor declares his work in *Sources* as “one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation—and thereby to make these sources again empower”, he is alluding to the way in which “best accounts” transform heretofore “buried goods” into now conversant objects of conscious knowledge (Taylor 1989b, 520). Via our moral intuition, and our capacity for rational reflection, Taylor contends that we are compelled to recognize the power of these goods. Further, Taylor states, echoing Socrates, that a substantive understanding of reason must include a core component of “linguistic articulacy”, and consequently, that “We aren’t full beings in this perspective until we can say what moves us, what our lives are built around” (Taylor 1989b, 92). Taylor construes the “best account” as so overwhelmingly central to the constitution of moral identity, and the commensurate sense of the “fullness” of being an authentic and dignified self, that he

argues in favour of a form of limited universalism. Indeed, Taylor's assertion that moral standards exist apart from our subjective desires, exerting a power over us and representing real milestones for our navigating life, would seem to firmly plant him in both the universalist, and realist camps.

I must distinguish between two currents of universalism which course through Taylor's work in *Sources*. The first form of universalism is a generalized form implicit in what Taylor asserts is his theoretical investigation of "moral intuitions which are uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal" (Taylor 1989b, 4). The second, and I argue more problematic, form of universalism, is that which pervades the paradigm of moral identity and articulation which Taylor develops in his concept of the "best account". Granted, Taylor does not prescribe any mandatory, universal content which must be included in a "best account" to render it either legitimate or meaningful. The unique nature of a "best account" rests precisely in the individual "discriminations" which gird it, and the particular goods toward which it is oriented.

The second current of universalism in Taylor's work however, is not a matter of commonality between accounts, but rather the decree of universality which Taylor attributes to the self-understanding derived from a "best account". The depiction of universalized self-understanding is tempered by Taylor's consistent emphasis upon the possibility of transitioning to better understandings. Nevertheless, Taylor clearly states in his discussion of cross-cultural conflict rooted in the incommensurability of differing accounts that "there is no reason not to think of the goods we are trying to define and criticize as universal, provided we afford the same status to those of other societies we are trying to understand" (Taylor 1989b, 62).

Taylor qualifies this decree of universality by cautioning that upon reflection, or in comparison with other accounts, we may revise our understandings and thus transition toward new accounts. Yet, following Taylor, it is not the account which is understood as universal as much as the self-understanding which the account grants the agent. Thus, while accounts change, the notion of self-understanding rooted in a universal adherence to the “best account principle” does not. Understanding this second current of universalism in Taylor’s theory is crucial for apprehending the picture of the empowered self at the heart of his moral theory. The self for Taylor represents the fullest realization of moral intuition and practical reasoning. Further, according to Taylor, the more sophisticated and articulate one’s “best account” becomes, is directly related to the robust character of the self it supports. This is the antidote to the *malaise* of modernity which Taylor feels is stunting our moral faculties.

Commensurately, the health of one’s moral identity depends upon the degree of (universalized) self-understanding conveyed through one’s “best account”. Again, I want to make it clear that Taylor allows that one may always transition to a better, “best account” in the face of a convincing critique, or an alternative reading of goods. However, once confirmed, Taylor strongly asserts that the self-understanding implicit in the expression of the hierarchy of goods, crowned by one’s “hypergood” (the crowning moral ideal in a personal hierarchy of goods) borne in the “best account” represents the *sine qua non* standard for orienting the self in the space of moral questions.

We sense in the very experience of being moved by some higher good that we are moved by what is good in it rather than that it is valuable because of our reaction. We are moved by it seeing its point as something infinitely valuable. We experience our love for it as a well-founded love. Nothing that couldn’t move me in *this* way would count as a hypergood. Of course, I could be wrong. The whole thing could be just a projection of some quite ordinary desire which confers this

seemingly exalted status on some object, surrounds it with a halo of the higher. Indeed, I could be. But I also could be right. The only way to decide is by raising and facing this or that particular critique. Is there a transition out of my present belief which turns on an error-reducing move? Do I have to recognize, for instance, that previously unavowed fears and desires of a despicable [sic] kind have been lending lustre to this good, which it quite loses when these are factored out? What successfully resists all such critique is my (provisionally) best account. There is nothing better I could conceivably have to go on. Or my critics either for that matter. So says the BA principle. (Taylor 1989b, 74)

### Secondary Sources

There has been curiously little serious analysis of Taylor's "best account principle". Although several scholars include a brief description of Taylor's understanding of the "best account" in their examinations of his work, their treatment of the concept rarely delves further than offering summary descriptions of Taylor's own construal of it in *Sources*. Perhaps most surprisingly, however, is that Taylor himself all but abandons his elucidation of the "best account principle" in his work after *Sources*. Amongst the community of scholars who follow and comment upon Taylor's work, those explicitly interested in his moral theory are in a definite minority. A great deal more has been written concerning Taylor's political theory (i.e. communitarianism, the politics of recognition), and his historical/anthropological approach to philosophy, than has been undertaken regarding his theoretical fusion of phenomenological and transcendental streams of moral philosophy.

There is no great mystery, however, as to why Taylorian scholarship is so heavily weighted to the political-historical side. The reason so little analysis, comparatively, has been applied to Taylor's moral theory, is in part, that Taylor himself has written so little about it, relative to the overall body of his work. Those of us who had held out hope that Taylor would someday re-visit the powerful and provocative exposition of moral theory

he presented in “Identity and the Good”, have had our hopes all but dashed with the publication of his most recent “really big book”, *A Secular Age*. In this tome, which appeared in 2007, Taylor confirmed his reputation as a leading scholar of the history of ideas. The consequence of Taylor’s demurral from any further focused exploration and elaboration of the moral theory he tendered in the first part of *Sources*, and which he has spent a good deal of time in other works writing around, is that we are left with only the commentary of a small band of scholars interested in this aspect of Taylor’s work to bolster our own analysis of the “best account principle”.

Even a cursory review of the body of secondary literature pertaining to the thought of Charles Taylor will turn up the name of Ruth Abbey. Abbey has distinguished herself as an intellectual biographer of Taylor. Abbey has published two of the most important introductory volumes regarding Taylor’s philosophical arguments, in addition to proving her extreme resourcefulness as the curator of an internet based bibliographic database maintaining an exhaustive listing of all things Taylorian.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, neither Abbey herself, in her introduction to Taylor’s *Philosophy*, *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor*, nor any of the contributors to her edited volume of essays tackling major themes in Taylor’s work, appropriately titled *Charles Taylor*, have taken up a substantive investigation of the “best account principle”.

This is not to say that Abbey has ignored the place of the “best account” in Taylor’s philosophy. Abbey has indeed addressed the presence of the “best account” in her own analysis of Taylor’s theory. However, her examination of the “best account” is primarily a re-iteration of what Taylor lays out in *Sources*, framed by an examination of Taylor’s notion of reason, and a description of him as a moral realist. Abbey outlines how

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<sup>19</sup> Abbey’s Taylor database can be found at <http://www3.nd.edu/~rabbey1/>

Taylor casts strong moral attachments to goods as a basic existential condition. She draws the line between Taylor and naturalists based upon Taylor's challenging any depiction of morality as an "optional extra" (Taylor 1989b, 68). Abbey describes how Taylor "proceeds with an argument about necessity. He contends that in trying to explain moral life, we need to take seriously the fact that humans experience their moral world as he says they do. The best account of morality must be one that incorporates the fact that individuals experience goods as being worthy of their admiration and respect for reasons that do not depend on their choice of them" (Abbey 2000, 28).

Much of what Abbey states helps to drive home the points covered earlier in this chapter regarding Taylor's exposition of moral theory in "Identity and the Good". One aspect of Abbey's description does, however, beg closer inspection. When Abbey asserts that "The best account of morality must be one that incorporates the fact that individuals experience goods as being worthy of their admiration and respect for reasons that do not depend on their choice of them" (ibid), she seems to go further than Taylor does in casting the power of goods over moral agents. In particular, Abbey's claim that subjects' "admiration and respect" for goods is experienced without regard to their "choice of them" as being worthy is, I believe, quite thought-provoking. Abbey cites page fifty-eight of *Sources* to back up her assertion. However, in my reading, Taylor does not present so nearly an imperious description of the relationship between the self and goods. As I cited above, in my own examination of the "best account principle", Taylor does argue that "The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses", and that in that sense the "best account" is "trumps" (Taylor 1989b, 58). However, the sense in which the "best account" is "trumps" depends on a reciprocal

relationship between agents and goods. This is a far cry from Abbey's portrayal of subjects as driven to a "best account" by goods "for reasons that do not depend on their choice of them".

Abbey's picture of the relationship between agents and moral sources as involuntary appears to fly in the face of Taylor's emphasis upon the inter-relatedness of "Selfhood and the good" and how they "turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes" (Taylor 1989b, 3). Further, Taylor's emphasis upon the importance of articulation places the onus upon agents to give expression to their strongly felt goods, so as to give power to these goods and make them accessible in "language communities". Here the power seems evenly divided between agents and goods, evinced by Taylor's assertion that "articulation is a necessary condition of adhesion, without it these goods are not even options" (Taylor 1989b, 91).

In counterpoint to Abbey's interpretation of Taylor's moral realism, I think it helpful to examine a more skeptical voice regarding Taylor's arguments. In his article entitled, "Charles Taylor The malaises of modernity and the moral sources of the self", which appeared in the journal *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Gary Kitchen undertakes a highly detailed critique of Taylor's moral theory. Kitchen probes the underlying rationale of several of Taylor's concepts, including the "best account principle" and "strong evaluation". Kitchen ultimately concludes that apart from Taylor's "belief that the 'quest' for moral meaning inescapably demands that we must all orient ourselves to something which he calls 'the good' – akin, perhaps, to MacIntyre's idea that the good life for man is the life spent seeking the good life for man – he gives no convincing explanation of why strong evaluations should be interpreted as expressing intuitions that



make ontological claims about our nature” (Kitchen 1999, 50). Kitchen’s reading of Taylor supplies a good deal of critical entries for probing what Taylor takes as given in his philosophical account. In this respect, Kitchen’s negative appraisal of the “best account principle”, although somewhat terse, does help to raise some questions regarding the character of Taylor’s concept of “best account”.

Although Abbey may have overstated Taylor’s portrayal of agents in thrall to goods, there is, nevertheless, an unintentional critical merit in her depiction of the goods as imposing upon an agent’s free will. This specifically concerns Taylor’s somewhat opaque and hurried description of “hypergoods”. This is an aspect of Taylor’s theory which I will explore in more depth in the following chapter. However, for the time being, Abbey’s depiction of Taylor’s moral realism, alongside Kitchen’s skepticism, can serve to prompt a more critical attentiveness to what may underlie Taylor’s explicit theorizations.

Abbey also undertakes a consideration of Taylor’s moral theory and the specter of epistemology. Abbey asks the same question I myself was driven to address regarding to what degree Taylor is actually “overcoming epistemology” (Abbey 2000, 188). Abbey concludes that “In contrast to the macro-level of foundationalism, Taylor’s approach to knowledge does not accord epistemology a primary position. In his preferred model, what matters primarily is not knowing about knowing, but knowing about being or doing: knowledge of ontology rather than of epistemology assumes priority” (Abbey 2000, 189). In drawing a hard line between “knowing about knowing” *contra* “knowing about being” I contend Abbey is splitting too fine a semantic hair. Taylor’s “best account principle” depends upon “transitions” from less lucid to more lucid accounts of moral identity. The

increase in lucidity depends upon agents obtaining ever deeper and more profound “self-interpretations” of the sources around which they have built their frameworks for navigating the space of moral questions. Hence, I argue that Taylor’s emphasis upon the quest for increased “clairvoyance” through the refining of one’s “best account” does, in fact, include a concern for “knowing about knowing” which then transfigures into “knowing about being”.

Taylor’s epistemological approach is radically different from the foundationalism of the naturalist model. However, as evinced in statements such as “The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes” (Taylor 1989b, 58), Taylor wears his desire to know about knowing on his sleeve. In fact, in the collection of essays assembled by Abbey in *Charles Taylor*, Terry Pinkard, in his contribution “Taylor, “History,” and the History of Philosophy”, offers a helpful description of Taylor’s “best account principle” in relation to Taylor’s notion of rational “transitions” which supports my own line of argument on the matter.

Pinkard invokes the “best account principle” in his discussion of Taylor’s historical-philosophical approach to the “transition” to the modern self; wherein Pinkard contends that “The upshot of any such philosophical history, however, has to be some account of what goods are real for us if we are to be in any kind of position to characterize some transitions as rational. It hinges, in Taylor’s view, on showing that some kinds of considerations are rational because they are unavoidable in the sense that attempts to do without them fail (either by rendering us incapable of fully being agents or

by surreptitiously smuggling back into our lives the very items they were claiming to be excluding)” (Pinkard 2004, 201). I find myself in agreement with Pinkard’s suggestion that, following Taylor, the “best account principle”, characterized by the movement of “transitions as rational”, constitutes a key element in measuring the fullness of one’s sense of self as dignified and authentic.

Yet, despite Pinkard’s crisp description of Taylor’s “best account principle”, his remains an analysis primarily pre-occupied with an examination of Taylor’s historical-philosophical narrative. There is no doubt that Pinkard offers interesting insights regarding the relationship between “best accounts” and the fullness of self, alongside an intriguing argument that Taylor’s model of the “best account” betrays him as a post-Romantic, anti-Kantian, heir to Hegel (Pinkard 2004, 206-207). However, these assertions are tangential to Pinkard’s primary project which focuses upon the historical-philosophical dimension of Taylor’s theory, and thus afford nothing in the way of a detailed investigation of the “best account principle” in itself. Thus, despite their detailed and comprehensive exploration of Charles Taylor’s varied philosophical endeavours, (which offer great support for the study of Taylorian theory), neither Ruth Abbey’s own analysis of Taylor’s thought, nor her edited collection of essays examining Taylor’s work, furnish us with a sustained and critical investigation of the “best account principle”.

Another name often associated with commentary on Taylor’s philosophy is that of Nicholas H. Smith. In his text *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, Smith offers a probing examination of Taylor’s overarching philosophical project. In this work Smith touches upon all of the significant facets of Taylor’s broad field of inquiries.

Smith, quite convincingly, argues that the impetus which drives Taylor's theoretical endeavours derives from a statement made by a philosophical favourite of Taylor's; Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Smith claims that Taylor's project can best be defined as propelled by Merleau-Ponty's statement in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception* that "Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xix). Smith elaborates on the implications of Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of being and meaning, asserting that "We are condemned to meaning in the sense that human life generally, and modern life in particular, is structured by inescapable layers of meaning or significance" (Smith 2002, 1). Smith's reading of Taylor as oriented by a Merleau-Pontian account of meaning is helpful for further establishing the genealogy of Taylor's outlook.

The importance to Taylor of Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the inescapably meaningful character of being is clear in the lines which follow Smith's quote from *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty argues that, in phenomenology, the poles of subjectivity and objectivity are bridged through rationality.

Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality. Rationality is precisely proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed. To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xix)

One need not stretch the imagination too far to detect a certain harmony between the passage above and Taylor's construal of the "best account principle". Smith, however, does not draw such a comparison. Instead, Smith concentrates on Taylor's hermeneutic approach and the phenomenological and linguistic influences evinced in his theoretical models. Although Smith does not afford us any substantive consideration of Taylor's

notion of the “best account”, he does offer an excellent interpretation of the specter of unity which casts a long shadow over Taylor’s depiction of narrative agency and self-realization.

Smith distinguishes between Taylor’s dynamic picture of the “questing” self, the self who employs “narrative identity” to give meaningful direction to their life as oriented toward a horizon of the good, and the “punctual self” which Taylor ascribes to a Lockean portrayal of “an object to be known through its transparent presence to a consciousness reflecting on itself” (Smith 2002, 98). While Smith does not invoke the “best account principle” in this passage, I argue that it is helpful nonetheless, for understanding what is at stake for Taylor in the “best account”. Smith’s emphasis upon the sense of movement characteristic of Taylor’s conception of the self, reminds us that although Taylor attributes a powerful role to intuition and strong evaluation, at no point does he allow for any reification of identity to creep in to his theory of the self. *Contra* naturalist paradigms, Taylor’s model of the self is far too engaged in the exigencies of a life “condemned to meaning”, to ever mutate into the extra-existential, meta-perceptive, disengaged agent fancied by naturalist philosophers. In this respect, Smith’s work helps to demonstrate how Taylor’s emphasis on narrative, and its place in the ongoing construal of a “best account”, functions as a bulwark against naturalist disengagement.

The absence of any concerted investigation of Taylor’s “best account principle” is not restricted to the commentaries of Abbey and Smith. The habit of overlooking the “best account” seems to have been established from the very outset of critical responses to Taylor’s thought. In the very first dedicated volume of essays examining Taylor’s arguments and ideas entitled *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of*

*Charles Taylor in Question*, edited by James Tully and published in 1994, the “best account” is but sparsely considered over the course of thirteen different responses to Taylor’s philosophy.

The most substantive discussion of the “best account” in this collection is undertaken by Michael L. Morgan in his essay “Religion, history and moral discourse”. For the most part Morgan reiterates much of Taylor’s description of the “best account” from *Sources*. Morgan employs the “best account” as a field in which to situate Taylor’s theistic tendencies and the ramifications of God constituting an orienting good, and thus a source for a subject’s “best account”. Based upon this extrapolation Morgan asserts that “In a way, then, Taylor’s account of articulacy, historical examination and practical reasoning serves as a vehicle of retrieval for religious discourse and religious commitment... Taylor’s account re-establishes the plausibility of the divine-human relationship as primary for our moral experience” (Morgan 1994, 54). Based upon this thesis, Morgan undertakes a comparative analysis juxtaposing Taylor’s philosophical disposition with the seminal presentation of the “I and Thou” in the work of Martin Buber (Morgan 1994, 59). Although in and of itself Morgan’s appraisal of the theistic possibilities allowed in Taylor’s theoretical model is tremendously interesting, it is, I contend, the response which Morgan’s essay elicits from Taylor which holds the most value for our present investigation.

Taylor’s reply to Morgan offers a rare “re-articulation” by Taylor of the “moral and spiritual” contours of agents’ “best accounts”. Regrettably, Taylor does not seize the opportunity granted by Morgan’s essay to further elucidate his understanding of the place and function of the “best account principle” in the development of the self. Thus,

Taylor's response to Morgan essentially acts as a rehashing of his theorization in *Sources*. Nevertheless, Taylor's re-visiting of "best account" does provide a sharpening of some elements of his original argument. On the matter of philosophical *genre*, Taylor's reply re-iterates his position within a field of phenomenological and transcendental investigation; evinced by his statement that "What I believe in is what figures in my best account of the world, history, and my experience as a moral and spiritual being, but what figure in this account are experience-transcendent things" (Taylor 1994, 226). Taylor's intent here is to demonstrate how "The God who figures in my account is not a function of my experience, although of course my *belief* in him, and access to him, is" (ibid). The degree of subtlety with which Taylor advances so powerful, and contentious, an argument for moral realism, is stunning.

In addition to confirming his philosophical disposition, Taylor also re-states his emphasis upon the necessity of "language communities" for the development and continuing health of moral identity. The notion of "webs of interlocution" is echoed in Taylor's assertion that "No one thinks totally alone...I think with, sometimes also against, but largely at least in the terms offered by my community" (Taylor 1994, 227).

Alongside his re-stating his stances on philosophy and language, Taylor offers two statements which help to clarify the picture of the self he envisions capable of articulating a "best account". Taylor asserts that "My community, my history, exceptional models, and my own reflection, have all combined to offer me a language in which I make sense of all this" (ibid). This intuits a multi-dimensional model of the self. Taylor's model of the self is one capable of making sense of and shaping myriad influences and intuitions into a coherent articulation of values. Following Taylor, this articulation is

always tentative and subject to revision. Nevertheless, the assembly of both intuited and experiential inputs by the self in Taylor's theory evinces a powerful inner life.

Alongside the picture of the inner resources Taylor ascribes to the self, he also offers, what I contend to be, an elaboration of some of the conditions of authenticity which he apprehends as integral to moral agency. This elaboration consists of his discussion of what counts toward a characterization of his religious account as modern. Taylor claims that, in addition to "facing up to the puzzlement of the plurality of religious and other outlooks", his is "also modern in giving the epistemological foreground to our moral and spiritual experience" (ibid). Admittedly, Taylor does not mention authenticity in this passage. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that Taylor's above mentioned definition can help to elucidate what he believes is at stake in the moral ideal of authenticity based upon the imperative to articulate a "best account" which conforms to the force of our moral and spiritual experiences.

Thus far, my examination of the body of secondary literature pertaining to the philosophy of Charles Taylor, has consciously steered clear of the large portion of commentary and response native to the bailiwick of political theory. My decision to eschew this domain of analysis rests upon my desire to focus on the moral component of his philosophy. Although there is no clear separation between matters of morality and politics either in Taylor's work, or in life; for the purposes of this dissertation, some albeit artificial borders, must be drawn. With that said, however, there are political philosophers whose work I must address, owing to the fact that their observations relate to Taylor's notion of "the best account".



One such theorist, whose work on Taylor deserves mention, is Gustavo Morello. Although it would be unfair to restrict the description of his study of Taylor's theories to the realm of political philosophy (as it includes a substantive consideration of the religious and secular dimensions of Taylor's thought) with regard to the "best account principle" Morello's insights are more in tune with political philosophy, than moral theory. Morello explicitly invokes the "best account" in his own socio-political theorization. In his article entitled, "Charles Taylor's 'imaginary' and 'best account' in Latin America", published, like Kitchen whom he cites, in the journal *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Morello undertakes an investigation of Latin American modernity using a lens crafted through the combination of aspects of Taylor's theory of modern social imaginaries, and the "best account" (Morello 2007, 618). Morello's approach is both novel and intriguing, and it helps to raise some practical questions regarding the socio-political effects of both individual and societal "strong evaluations". Nevertheless, his conclusions are geared toward a better understanding of class, polity, power and recognition in Latin America, rather than an investigation of the "best account principle" in and of itself (Morello 2007, 637).

The political implications of the "best account principle" are also explored in Charles Taylor's reply to his one time student Daniel M. Weinstock regarding the character of "strong evaluation" tendered in Weinstock's essay "The political theory of strong evaluation", which also appeared in the Tully compendium. Taylor prefaces an argument against Weinstock's "normative" portrayal of the character of "strong evaluation" (Weinstock 1994, 172), with a preamble addressing the matter of universality in his theory; "First, a quick word about 'strong evaluation'. I think this is something like

a human universal, present in all but what we would clearly judge as very damaged human beings” (Taylor 1994, 249). Taylor’s claim that “strong evaluation” is “something like a human universal” comes frustratingly close to a declaration of the absolute necessity of “strong evaluation” in the development and maintenance of moral identity. From this point, it would only be a matter of connecting the theoretical dots to arrive at the conclusion that a “best account” is a universal requirement of moral agency. Although Taylor does not take this step in responding to Weinstock, his near endorsement of the universality of “strong evaluation”, and the threat of “damaged” selfhood in its absence, does call to mind Taylor’s connection of integral selfhood and articulation (Taylor 1989b, 92).

The implication of “something like” universality surrounding the capacity for “strong evaluation”, coupled with Taylor’s inference that “full being” depends in part upon the ability to articulate, what in Taylorian vocabulary must be considered a “best account”, raises questions concerning what standards of normative agency are implied in Taylor’s theoretical model of the self. The suggestion of universality, which colours some of Taylor’s theoretical arguments, represents a particular concern for Isaiah Berlin. Berlin has known Taylor as both a pupil and an interlocutor, and he makes some very salient points regarding Taylor’s not-so-latent universalism. Writing in the introduction to Tully’s volume of essays, Berlin spares little time asserting what he believes distinguishes Taylor’s philosophical approach.

The chief difference between my outlook and that of Charles Taylor is that he is basically a teleologist – both as a Christian and as a Hegelian. He truly believes, as so many in the history of thought have done and still do, that human beings, and perhaps the entire universe, have a basic purpose – whether created by God, as religious Christians and Jews believe, or by nature, as Aristotle and his followers, and perhaps Hegel (whose attitude on this point seems to me somewhat

ambivalent), have taught. Consequently, everything that he has written is concerned with what people have believed, striven after, developed into, lived in light of, and, finally, the ultimate goals towards which human beings as such are by their very nature determined to move. (Berlin 1994, 1)

Berlin's assessment strikes at the heart of Taylor's vision. Yet, Berlin's conclusion also strikes what I consider an off note. I heartily agree with Berlin's description of Taylor as concerned with the questions of "what people have believed, striven after and developed into". These queries are entirely appropriate to a historical, anthropological, philosophical inquiry into the sources of the self. Further, it would strain credulity to deny Taylor's theistic disposition. However, to mount the charge of teleology against Taylor based on these premises does not, in my opinion, hold water. Taylor recognizes the power of goods as real sources for moral identity development, and articulation. Berlin senses "essentialism" at work in Taylor's theory leading to accusations of soteriological determinism, a "march inexorably towards some single predestined goal" (Berlin 1994, 2). Further, Berlin ties Taylor's early Marxist leanings into the providential typecasting of his theory. However, what Berlin ignores is the roll and character of the "best account" in Taylor's philosophy. Taylor's concept of the "best account" as a tentative, revisable articulation of an individual's "strongly evaluated" moral intuitions leaves no room for the possibility of all selves marching toward a "single predestined goal". Although I agree that a strong sense of universalism overarches Taylor's philosophical endeavour, it is not the sort of facile teleology which Berlin ascribes to Taylor.

### Questions

Despite Berlin's over-reaching, his critique of Taylor does raise some salient points. I have already described how the tenor of universalism expressed in Taylor's

theory operates on different levels. To add to this, there is the suggested portrayal in Taylor's work of a universalized, normative self which requires serious investigation. Although Taylor adamantly insists upon the embodied nature of agents, he says nothing of gender. Taylor's entire construal of embodiment focuses upon an analogical description of the space of moral questions, and physical space, but what of gendered experience in moral and physical space? The result is that the framework for moral identity development which Taylor constructs is, implicitly, neuter.

In Taylor's theorization of the development of the modern, western concept of the self, he counts as "one of the most basic aspirations of human beings, the need to be connected to, or in contact with, what they see as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental value." And he asks, "how could it be otherwise, once we see that this orientation in relation to the good is essential to being a functional human agent?" (Taylor 1989b, 42). How indeed? Taylor's argument leaves little room for an alternative construal of the grounds for moral agency. In Taylor's account, the work of self-clarifying one's relation to the moral sources/goods which most powerfully appeal to one's sense of living an authentic life, is imperative to "being a functional human agent". To wit, authentic selfhood, expressed through the "best account" is a universal requirement of "full being". Viewed in the light of universality it appears that Taylor's concept of the self is highly exclusive. It depends upon several conditions such as higher reasoning, a broad and sophisticated lexicon of terms for self-reporting, and not least, an acceptance of Taylor's rather murky notion of moral intuition.

Is there truly no way to conceive of a full sense of self aside from Taylor's basic premise of a self-understood orientation to a self-interpreted good? Are there not shades

of narcissism in this picture of authentic selfhood? Could it not be “otherwise”? These and other questions beg exploration. In the following chapter we will examine what the ideas of scholars such as Jane Flax, Arto Laitinen, Philip J. Harold, and Emanuel Levinas might contribute to picturing moral agency “otherwise”.

## Chapter Four

### Investigating Authenticity

Concepts of understanding and meaning are not unproblematic.  
(Flax 1990, 12)

In this chapter we shall embark upon the critical investigation of and hermeneutical intervention into the moral theory advanced by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*. Prior to launching upon the always contentious waters of critique and exegesis, I wish to borrow as a maxim for our journey the succinct and insightful statement above, made by Jane Flax in her work *Thinking Fragments*. Flax's statement goes some way toward diffusing the tension which surrounds discussions, and critiques, of meaning and understanding, by placing all theorizations and claims regarding such, under the sign of the finite and the flawed.

Following Flax, all theorists who brave the discourse surrounding the complexities of meaning and understanding are bound to exhibit blind spots regarding the content of their arguments, and the scope of their claims. Thus, it is inevitable that some portion of all theoretical expositions will be viewed as problematic by other participants in the wider discourse surrounding a given subject. This is the case concerning my reading of Taylor's model of the self, moral agency, and his elaboration of the "best account principle". The maxim I have adopted from Flax also makes me keenly aware that my own critique of Taylor will inevitably contain elements which will be received as problematic by other interlocutors. As such, I tender the following analysis as limited in scope to those features of Taylor's work which I feel, based on my own reading, require either further elucidation, or substantial re-imagination. My goal in this chapter is to open

the door to a critical re-interpretation of Taylor's model of moral agency, and the character of the relation to moral sources it suggests.

I will present my critique of Taylor's model of moral agency from *Sources* on three fronts. I recognize that drawing borders between the inevitably intertwined facets of what is a rather far reaching theoretical paradigm is an artificial conceit. However, in the interests of clarity, such an exercise in dissection is, I argue, necessary. Taylor's philosophical gambit in *Sources* is incredibly prodigious. Taylor manages to smoothly maneuver the reader from Aristotle and Plato, through Hobbes and Locke, right up to Foucault. Further, Taylor guides this philosophical tour in so competent and confident a manner that, at the end of *Sources*, the reader is hard pressed to find any gaps in his historical account of the development of the modern concept of the self. Consequently, most of the critique of *Sources*, as noted in the previous chapter, has focused upon the perceived teleological, and/or theistic motivations underlying Taylor's project. These critiques are not without merit. That being said, I believe that the concentration upon these themes in Taylor's work has left other important issues regarding his exposition all but unaddressed.

Going forward, I will raise and examine these issues. The first prong of my critique will focus upon the neutered tone of Taylor's concept of embodiment. Embodiment forms a crucial axis around which much of Taylor's philosophy revolves. My critique will demonstrate how the notion of embodiment advanced by Taylor, which is firmly rooted in Taylor's reading of Merleau-Ponty, suffers from a glaring inattention to matters of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. The second thrust in my critique will grapple with the depiction of "full" being which Taylor alludes to in the moral theory he

advances in *Sources*. Taylor trades upon a Socratic notion of “fullness” in his discussion of the importance of articulation for moving agents closer to the good (Taylor 1989b, 92). Much of Taylor’s measure of “full being” relies upon practical reasoning and articulation, which constitute crucial facets of what I have termed his transitional epistemology. I will demonstrate how Taylor’s suggested criteria for measuring “fullness” of being, implicitly excludes whole classes of human beings. This exclusion is rooted in the sophisticated, articulate criteria which Taylor requires for moving toward ever more “full”, authentic, and dignified self-understanding. Taylor, perhaps unwittingly, sets up a normative standard of moral agency in *Sources* which requires serious questioning. Furthermore, Taylor’s description of the power and place occupied by “hypergoods” in an agent’s quest for authentic moral identity requires interrogation. The orientation to such awesome goods casts a somewhat troubling pall over the potentially single-minded devotion which “hypergoods” may elicit from agents whose frameworks are dominated by them.

Finally, I will conclude my critique with a consideration of the paradigm of moral identity, moral ontology, and the tenor of discourse which emerges from Taylor’s theory. I will argue that, while this depiction is intriguing, in regard to the lived experience of moderns in the west, Taylor’s moral argument (which exceeds the boundaries of either a strictly phenomenological or historical account of the self), requires re-consideration. Taylor not only describes the contours and concerns central to the modern western notions of the self, he advances a moral claim regarding the goodness and fullness of this concept. It is my aim to highlight the shortcomings of Taylor’s understanding of what constitutes the moral imperative. Specifically, I will argue that Taylor’s notion of the “best account principle” suffers from an excessive focus upon the



integrity of the self, which is endemic in post-Enlightenment western thought. I will illustrate how substituting a Levinasian concept of ethics, in place of Taylor's own preoccupation with dignity and authenticity, may light the way toward a different sense of self, articulation, and what we imagine to be best.

### On Embodiment

In the previous chapter we touched upon how the concept of embodied, and engaged agency, is central to Taylor's theorizing in *Sources*. While Taylor himself has been exceedingly clear on this point in a variety of essays, Ruth Abbey may actually state the case best regarding the rootedness of Taylor's thought in this phenomenological outlook, and the way it allows him to challenge the naturalist representational model of knowledge.

This picture of engaged embodied agency challenges not just the tendency towards minimizing the body's impact on ordinary ways of knowing but also the very possibility of an inner/outer separation that characterizes the representational approach to knowledge. The sort of know-how that expresses itself in everyday coping cannot be construed as something that resides in my head or even in my body alone. It manifests itself in a way of operating in and with the world, so any idea of separating the self from its world becomes forced and artificial.

However, it is not just knowledge about the world that Taylor depicts in this way: self-knowledge and self-interpretations are also embodied.

(Abbey 2000, 181)

It is both curious, and somewhat frustrating, that Taylor does not take the time in *Sources* to elaborate upon what he has said elsewhere regarding embodied, and engaged agency. Taylor expends a good deal of ink in *Sources* critiquing the disengaged notion of agency at the heart of the naturalist perspective. Yet, Taylor seems to take for granted that his readers understand the particular brand of embodiment which he attaches to his concept of engaged agency, and the arguments he marshals against naturalism based

upon this perspective. Here Taylor presumes too much. To begin with, Taylor seems to presuppose that a Merleau-Pontyan theory of embodiment more or less exhausts the term.

Prior to delving into the ways in which Taylor's presumption of embodiment falls short of the possible understandings which I argue must be considered when discussing embodiment, I think it is prudent to review exactly what Taylor includes under the term embodiment. In his essay "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments" Taylor summarizes the theory of embodiment, which he derives from Merleau-Ponty, and which frames his investigation into moral agency.

Now our perception of the world is essentially that of an embodied agent, engaged or at grips with the world... our perception as an experience is such that it could only be that of an embodied agent engaged with the world. Let's consider.

Our perceptual field has an orientational structure, a foreground and a background, an up and down. And it must have; that is, it can't lose this structure without ceasing to be a perceptual field in the full sense, our opening onto a world. (Taylor 1995, 23)

For Taylor, the construal of embodied agency as constituting our "opening onto a world" is basic to the phenomenological theory of Merleau-Ponty. Taylor has adopted this perspective, tying embodiment to spatial orientation, as a basic feature of his moral theory. No concept goes unchanged when interpreted, and thus to say that Taylor ascribes to a Merleau-Pontyan theory of embodiment is overly facile. To grasp the character of embodiment which defines Taylor's perspective, we must explore how he reads Merleau-Ponty's theory himself.

Happily, Taylor wrote an exegetical essay entitled, "Embodied Agency", in which he undertakes an analysis of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In the introduction of "Embodied Agency" Taylor casts Merleau-Ponty's legacy as having advanced a philosophical understanding of humans as embodied agents. Taylor illustrates

the importance of Merleau-Ponty's work in this area, claiming that Merleau-Ponty "has made the most convincing case for this view, and that he has explored its ramifications to unparalleled distance and depth" (Taylor 1989a, 1). However, the measure of "distance and depth" which Taylor attributes to Merleau-Ponty's exploration of embodiment is calculated according to what Taylor believes pertinent to the phenomenology of embodiment. To wit, Taylor's summary of Merleau-Ponty's groundbreaking insights.

The core thesis might be put in a few terse assertions. The human subject is an agent, engaged in activity, and engaged in a world, which is his world. He is an embodied subject. (ibid)

Taylor emphasizes the engaged position of the embodied human subject as, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "*être au monde*", or being in the world (Taylor 1989a, 7). This clearly resonates with the picture of the engaged agent which Taylor champions in *Sources*. Indeed, Taylor takes the opportunity in "Embodied Agency" to denounce the "*chimaera*" of the naturalist paradigm of disengagement; "the notion of the subject as monad, or as an inner core which could be described without reference to the world" (Taylor 1989a, 8). Taylor concludes his essay concerning the place of embodiment in the work of Merleau-Ponty with an appeal for the expression of the character of embodied agency in the linguistic dimension. Taylor argues that we must "innovate in language, and bring the structures of our being in the world to clarity by formulations which open up a zone which is ordinarily outside our range of thought and attention" (Taylor 1989a, 19).

Taylor's demand that we "innovate in language" strongly accords with his emphasis in *Sources* upon articulation, exemplified in his argument concerning the "best account principle". Taylor borrows Merleau-Ponty's description of our "being in the

world” and applies it to his concept of the agent orienting themselves in the space of moral questions. Important features of Taylor’s moral theory, such as engagement, reflection, and articulation, evince the strong influence of Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “an articulated field is essential to having a world, that embodied agency is essential to the articulated field; that a sense of ourselves as agents is constitutive of the field” (Taylor 1989a, 17).

In “Embodied Agency” Taylor asserts that “we have an articulated field: we accept as self-evident that we have access to the world through a perceptual field; and we are brought to see that we cannot make sense of this field if we try to reconstruct it in terms which make no reference to embodied agency” (ibid). For Taylor the articulated field is ontological, and the “best account” is an account geared toward making sense of our orientation in the space of moral questions. A space we are embedded in as embodied agents.

The importance of Merleau-Ponty’s construal of embodiment for Taylor’s project in *Sources* is demonstrated by Taylor’s insistence that articulating one’s stance in the space of moral questions represents an essential aspect of moral agency. In “Embodied Agency” Taylor outlines the orientating nature of embodiment, stating that “we wouldn’t understand what the articulations, up-down, near-far, etc. could conceivably be, if we weren’t embodied agents with a sense of ourselves as embodied agents” (Taylor 1989a, 7). This statement resonates strongly with his contention in *Sources* that underlying agents’ frameworks for navigating the space of moral questions, is a sense of spatial orientation ingrained in their perspective as embodied agents.

What this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in

which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. I feel myself drawn here to use a spatial metaphor; but I believe this to be more than personal predilection. There are signs that the link with spatial orientation lies very deep in the human psyche. (Taylor 1989b, 28)

There is much to admire in Taylor's "phenomenological account of identity" as he lays it out in *Sources*. I strongly endorse Taylor's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's basic premise of embodied agency as he applies it to the context of the space of moral questions. Taylor's contention that, as embodied agents, we all have a sense of up, down, near and far, and that this orientating sense extends to our stance in the space of moral questions, renders his warning that losing one's orientation in moral space leads to a confusion indicative of a dissociative disorder, or pathology, all the more disturbing (Taylor 1989b, 31).

Taylor develops an interesting line of arguments concerning the relationship between embodiment and moral orientation. One need not, however, challenge the tenability of Taylor's claims regarding the "limits of the conceivable in human life" (Taylor 1989b, 32), to effect a critique of the "distance and depth" of Taylor's model of embodiment.

In giving a "best account" Taylor makes it clear that the moral agent is acting from an engaged perspective and that the "terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses" (Taylor 1989, 58). In Taylor's discussion of the fully engaged self, wherein he envisions agents orienting themselves, and articulating their stance in the space of moral questions, the consideration for embodiment seems to stop at the abstract level of orientation.

Ultimately, I contend that Taylor's account of an embodied sense of orientation in the space of moral questions lacks any serious consideration of agents' actual bodies. Taylor's claim that "a sense of ourselves as agents is constitutive of the field" implies that articulation, such as that envisioned by Taylor's "best account principle", is free to ignore the corporeal. I believe a great deal is left out if we follow Taylor's lead regarding embodiment and moral agency. As embodied agents there are features of our embodiment with which Taylor seems unconcerned. Taylor's formulation of an agent's "best account" necessarily leaves out crucial references to embodied experience such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and health. I argue that, in this respect, Taylor's thinking about embodiment suffers from a disengagement from the particular. This disengagement limits Taylor's construal of the relationship between embodiment and moral identity to the sense of orientation. As such, what emerges in Taylor's theory is a concept of a self whose identity is defined by an understanding of where one stands in relation to one's goods.

to be able to answer for oneself is to know where one stands, what one wants to answer. And that is why we naturally tend to talk of our fundamental orientation in terms of who we are. To lose this orientation, or not to have found it, is not to know who one is. And this orientation, once attained, defines where you answer from, hence your identity. (Taylor 1989b, 29)

### On Gender

Taylor fails to consider any of the corporeal, cultural, or political dimensions of embodiment which may limit agents' ability to "answer" with regard to their identities. Furthermore, are our moral identities as monolithic as Taylor's description suggests? It would be unfair to describe Taylor's philosophy as patriarchal, and it is my distinct intent to steer clear of the sort of easy *ad hominem* attacks characteristic of such a line of

critique. Nevertheless, Taylor's body of thought does evince universalizing tendencies with respect to the development of moral identity and the model of the self he envisions. Taylor's attitude here evinces a glaring lack of attention to the power and place of ideas and expectations regarding gender and identity in the modern west. It is important here to differentiate between Taylor's acknowledgement of the exclusion and marginalization of women and other groups from certain prospects of social realization (Taylor 1989b, 46), and the more integral consideration of gender as a fundamental feature of embodiment which my critique addresses.

I should also note that my comments are restricted to Taylor's moral philosophy as it appears in *Sources of the Self*, and that, although I am well aware of Taylor's arguments regarding the politics of recognition, which appeared in an essay of the same name in the edited volume *Multiculturalism* in 1992, I do not consider the political analysis Taylor carried out therein as informing the notion of embodiment which underlies his work in *Sources*. My own critical investigation here will be restricted to the matter of gender and embodiment in Taylor's moral theory as it appears specifically in the first part of *Sources*. The absence of any substantive foray into the rich territory of gender theories leaves a massive gap in Taylor's portrait of the modern self.

Although there has been a limited engagement with some of Taylor's work on the part of certain Feminist thinkers, it has been largely restricted to his political philosophy. Melissa A. Orlie outlines the paucity of dialogue between Taylor and Feminist philosophers in her essay "Taylor and Feminism: From Recognition of Identity to a Politics of the Good." In her essay, which appeared in the collection *Charles Taylor* edited by Ruth Abbey, Orlie outlines how feminist critique of Taylor has stuck largely to

his work on the theory of recognition. Orlie cites, as an example, the way in which scholars such as “Susan Wolf and Linda Nicholson question Taylor’s apparent assumption that his arguments about distinct cultural identities can be applied to women as a social category” (Orlie 2004, 140). Orlie points out that while Wolf and Nicholson ask insightful questions regarding the place of gender in what is essentially an ethno-cultural framework, they do not address Taylor’s moral theory in their critique. Orlie launches a lucid and challenging argument which presents moral concerns as crucial to feminist political theory. Orlie asserts that “As feminist theorists and activists have become more astute about power, they have become less articulate about their visions of the good” (Orlie 2004, 140).

Orlie contends that feminists must complement the potent critique of gender bias and suppression with coherent expressions of the “goods” which inspire feminist analysis. What Orlie is pointing to is the lack of an explicit account of the moral ideas underlying the reformative work of critical theories. Orlie’s argument can be applied to a broad range of critical philosophies. While the thrust of Orlie’s critique is geared toward raising an awareness of the place of moral sources in feminist theory and critique, I believe that she simultaneously exposes a converse shortcoming in Taylor’s own approach.

The feminist focus on the political and social dimensions of embodied experience includes a serious consideration for the corporeal consequences involved in theorizing agents’ bodies. Such concern is absent from Taylor’s concept of embodiment, which is rooted in a sense of spatial orientation. Unfortunately, Orlie never pursues this path of critique as she is occupied with her own project welding moral and political theories into



the superstructure of western feminist discourse. Nevertheless, her essay acted as an impetus for my own thinking about the absence of gender in Taylor's theory.

It is disconcerting that a thinker as meticulous as Taylor would be blind to the message conveyed by the presentation of a theory of embodied moral identity which ignores gender. To grasp the severe consequences of excluding a consideration of gender from a theory of embodiment and identity, we must establish a basic understanding of what it is that is being excluded.

In the interest of clarity and concision, I will restrict my analysis to what I consider to be two of the most helpful approaches to the consideration of gender and embodiment *vis à vis* our discussion of Taylor. These two approaches to gender occupy somewhat antagonistic positions in the realm of gender studies. However, I believe each offers unique elements necessary for a more substantive examination of the modern notion of selfhood. The two figures who best articulate these respective perspectives on gender, embodiment, identity and the self, are Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler. The central point of disagreement between the theoretical approaches to gender, advanced by Irigaray and Butler, has to do with the question of whether gender, i.e. categorization female/male, is strictly a function of a "juridical" power narrative, as says Butler, or has some antecedent metaphysical qualities, as Irigaray concludes.

Both Irigaray and Bulter make excellent arguments regarding the nuances of the tropes and metaphors which suffuse the vocabulary of the body, gender, and identity in the west. The examination of both theorists is important for keeping in mind that the term gender does not signify a static category, and that my critique of Taylor represents one of many, different, possible approaches. Consequently, I shall bracket the tensions between

Irigaray's and Butler's conclusions, and stick to those insights most pertinent to our critical intervention into Taylor's theory.

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler takes a Foucauldian tack regarding the matter of language, representation and the categorization of gender, and the mode of critical engagement which such a discursive model requires.

The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. As such, the critical point of departure is *the historical present*, as Marx put it. And the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize. (Butler 1990, 8)

In pursuit of such a temporally situated, material critique, Butler undertakes a critical analysis of the genealogy underlying the ways in which the normalizing power of western "juridical" language and practice has given rise to systems of regulating ideals governing the inculcation, and commensurate expectations, of gender in western societies. A main insight derived from Butler's critical analysis demonstrates how subjects enter into a pre-constituted field of existential norms and understandings. Taylor touches on a similar notion in his discussion of how agents are "partly constituted" through their development within pre-existing language communities (Taylor 1989b, 35). Taylor's description of this phenomenon is largely positive, and functions to lay a communal foundation for the commensurability of the agent's quest to articulate an increasingly authentic account of moral identity within his theory.

Butler's portrayal of the discursive framework is, in contrast to Taylor's, markedly less upbeat. Butler elucidates how, in the west, the normalizing discursive

framework is established upon a juridical and political superstructure born of the modern idealization of equality, rationality and a secularized soteriology of progressiveness. Butler highlights how the recognition of one's subjectivity in our society is contingent upon the legitimizing force of the norms attached to the idea of who is entitled to the rights guaranteed by the juridical structure. Entitlement here is tied to a naturalistic concept of internally coherent, binary gender. Butler's analysis focuses upon the troubling naturalist *a priori* correlation between the corporeal and the cultural.

This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire. The metaphysical unity of the three is assumed to be truly known and expressed in a differentiating desire for an oppositional gender—that is, in a form of oppositional heterosexuality. Whether as a naturalistic paradigm which establishes a causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire, or as an authentic-expressive paradigm in which some true self is said to be revealed simultaneously or successively in sex, gender, and desire... The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term... The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire. (Butler 1990, 30-31)

The absence of any explicit consideration of gender in Taylor's theoretical discourse in *Sources* passively endorses the naturalistic assumptions regarding gender. I am aware that I am effectively convicting Taylor on a count of omission. Nonetheless, to omit a consideration of gender from an argument against naturalism as sophisticated as that which Taylor makes in "Identity and the Good" is unacceptable. In failing to take gender into account, Taylor effectively consents to the naturalist scheme wherein essential characteristics are assigned based upon the binarism inherent in the "consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire."

It is troubling that Taylor gives no weight to the facet of gender in his reflections on the development of moral identity (Taylor 1989b, 29). It begs the question; does the intuitive relationship which Taylor postulates exist between agents and goods evince no gendered characteristics? Are agents' stances in the space of moral questions established prior to the imposition of societal norms governing gender? If this is the case, it would at least partly explain why Taylor does not include attention to gender in his concept of the "best account". If moral identity is forged in a space free from the binary gender norms dominant in the west, then perhaps Taylor does not think it relevant to include gender as an influence upon "best accounts".

Still, in so much as the "best account" is an articulation of an agent's moral identity, expressed in the languages of moral and spiritual discernment, we learn "by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up" (Taylor 1989b, 35), it seems a grave oversight to ignore gender in articulation. Unless, of course, when Taylor states that "There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language" (ibid), he has in mind a language unburdened by norms regarding gender, ethnicity, class, and so on. Further, the matter of sexuality, and norms regarding sexual orientation, raise thorny questions concerning the limited content of a "best account" articulated by what I argue is the universalized, neutered concept of self advanced by Taylor in *Sources*.

Jane Flax offers a salient reading of the origins in the Enlightenment of the grammar which imbues modern moral philosophy with a desire for universal appeal. A desire which I contend colours some of Taylor's arguments in *Sources*.

A number of assumptions and wishes motivate this hankering for a universal. It is a trace of the continuing operation of Enlightenment belief systems and the absence of useful alternatives to them.

One characteristic Enlightenment belief is articulated by Kant, Rousseau, and others (for example, our contemporaries Rawls and Habermas). These authors assert that a moral claim can possess force or legitimacy only if it is made in the name of all (mankind). These approaches share a fundamental problem—such a unitary voice requires the suppressing of many differences. The masking of this suppression makes the appearance of universality, universal consent (or pragmatics), or a general will more convincing. (Flax 1993, 26)

This raises some interesting questions regarding Taylor's "best account principle". The act of articulating a "best account" in Taylor's theory may be approached as a performative act. Taylor claims that articulation brings empowering moral sources closer to us, "And in the most evident examples the power is not a function of the formulation alone, but of the whole speech act. Indeed, the most powerful case is where the speaker, the formulation, and the act of delivering the message all line up together to reveal the good" (Taylor 1989b, 96). The symmetry of the model Taylor presents is quite appealing. However, is such a balanced performance possible? Can agents be so single purposed? And what of the identity Taylor apprehends as expressed in these accounts, are we to understand it as being as coherent as his formula above? Butler advances some interesting arguments regarding gender, performance, and identity, which might help us to think more critically about Taylor's model of the "whole speech act."

*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything." In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated

or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. (Butler 1990, 33)

I have no doubt that Taylor would take serious issue with Butler’s Nietzschean premise denying the “being behind the doing”. Nevertheless, Butler makes a salient case for understanding all performative acts (which I contend includes “best accounts”) as coloured by the norms native to the socio-historical context of the performance. This includes the languages in which they are performed. As such, we need to ask what norms might be perpetuated through the articulation of a “best account”. And might these norms be clothed in a veneer of universality by the agents who apprehend them to be empowering?

Butler’s work can help us in another facet of our examination of Taylor’s theory. In *Sources* Taylor develops a very particular model of moral agency. Butler describes her project as,

a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization.

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.  
(Butler 1990, 43)

Taylor makes no serious reference to gender in *Sources*. Nevertheless, we might ask, what would a “genealogy of gender” turn up in Taylor’s work? I posit that if we investigate the discursive production of the self by Taylor in *Sources*, what we encounter

is a *genre* of universalized, abstracted, and neuter masculine agent.<sup>20</sup> The combination of the terms neuter, masculine, and universal, in reference to the qualities of the archetypal agent presented in *Sources* (as well as many other works of modern philosophy), seems paradoxical and confused. After all, how could a subject be simultaneously neuter, and masculine? Following Butler, we must first acknowledge that the concept of gender may be interpreted as a product of discourse. It is accepted that an oxymoronic configuration of terms appears from time to time in discourse, and as troubling as they may be, they are a reality of language games. Further, the imposition of a particular category of being, i.e. masculinity, as a universal quality overarching other categories of being, is readily apparent in western discourses. Some of the most penetrating, expository work in this area of discourse genealogy and gender theory has been carried out by Luce Irigaray.

The idiosyncratic, poetic tenor of Irigaray's writing, allows her to probe and explore aspects of language in a manner which forces her readers to confront the actuality of what Margret Whitford described as the "woman-as-subject and her identity in thought and culture" (Whitford 1991, 13). Through her articulation of a complex and thickly descriptive grammar evoking the "female" body, Irigaray provides a vocabulary laden with "corporeality" for speaking about "*sexe*" and embodiment. Irigaray challenges the naturalistic grammar that normalizes the masculine as a universal condition of being, i.e. mankind, thus assigning the feminine to a descriptive sub-category of the omnipotent masculine.

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor launches *Sources* with the statement that "I want to explore various facets of what I will call the 'modern identity'. To give a good first approximation of what this means would be to say that it involves tracing various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self." (Taylor 1989b, 3) Yet, at no point does he consider gender in relation to any of these categories. Thus, the "human agent, person, or self" which develops is neuter. Further, in so far as Taylor envisions the bearers of "modern identity" to belong to a common class of "human agency" the lack of gender is universalized in *Sources*.

The prevalence of the assignation of the feminine under the sign of normalized masculine universality in the west is epitomized by Taylor's inattentiveness to gender in his theorizing the self. Irigaray's work makes it clear that moral discourse shall remain both stunted and unjust as long as it revolves around the normalized, masculine universal subject. In her essay "The Three *Genres*", Irigaray claims that "*Genre* represents the site of the nonsubstitutable positioning of the *I* and the *you* and of their modalities of expression" (Irigaray 1991, 141). This statement elicits a sense of the differentiation of subjectivity and responsibility manifested in a relational framework.

However, the prevalence of a "neuter" abstracted *genre* of the universal masculine, allows for a disavowal of relational subjectivity. Irigaray describes how the masculine *genre* is cloaked in discursive universality, insidiously establishing a grammatical normativity couched in the particular interests of patriarchal power structures, somewhat akin to Butler's notion of juridical discourse. The deferral of a specific grammatical *genre* allows for the "neuter" masculine universal to preside over discourse, and enforce a patriarchal, disembodied authority. Thus, the dialectic between the *I* and the *you* is subsumed under a masculine universal grammar which colours all elements of "being in the world".

Irigaray illustrates how this hegemonic grammar is used in the French language to paint phenomena both natural and moral, transposing the "il pleut" into the ethical impersonal "il faut".(ibid). The damaging effects of the disembodied perspective inculcated by the adoption of the "neuter" position are not limited to the subjugation of the feminine. Irigaray points out that the "neuter" also prevents men from apprehending their own condition as "sexuate" beings.



Abstracted from what Irigaray holds is their “sexuate” nature, it is impossible for men to grasp the breadth of the difference at play in the world. Irigaray paints relationality as dependent upon sexual difference<sup>21</sup>, and that the production and reproduction of both the physical and the intellectual, requires sexual difference. Irigaray maintains that relationality shall remain unjust and injurious to all agents as long as the de-sexuate disembodiment perpetuated by the “neuter” masculine universal subject represents the normative position in western discourses. Irigaray states that “Man, who, thanks to his labour, has a monopoly on the symbolic, has not thought his body or his flesh” (Irigaray 1991, 150). Men identify with the universal masculine *genre* and thus fail to grasp their own particularity. As a consequence, men are blind to the particularity of others. It is my contention that despite all of Taylor’s acumen regarding embodied agency, he nevertheless suffers from the effects of writing in a “neuter” grammar, which excludes the fundamental consideration of embodiment and gender. In effect, Taylor has given his concept of the self a body, but has neglected to consider the flesh.

Irigaray offers us a possible mode for re-thinking embodiment and sexuate relationality through a theory of an ethics of sexual difference. The challenge which Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference presents to the idea of the “neuter”, masculine universal subject is born of a strong articulation of the woman/feminine as a *genre* different from, and irreducible to, the masculine universal ideal. The hoped for effect of such a strong articulation is that the dissonance of a voice erupting from what is assumed to be the unified category of agency, wherein all agents are represented by the “neuter” I, and guided by the masculine universal “*il faut*”, will be forced to recognize the presence of the feminine as a distinct *genre*. The disruption of the metaphysics of the “neuter”,

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<sup>21</sup> a position that is at odds with that of Butler

masculine universal paradigm is underlined by Whitford's description of what Irigaray argued represented the other for the "neuter" I; "man's other, says Irigaray, has always been conceived of as god, and not the other sex" (Whitford 1991a, 47).

I contend that a hint of this dialectic overshadows Taylor's construal of the relationship between the self and the good in *Sources*. In the denouement to Taylor's theoretical argument in the first part of *Sources*, he suggests that "Our modern senses of the self not only are linked to and made possible by new understandings of good but also are accompanied by (i) new forms of narrativity and (ii) new understandings of social bonds and relations" (Taylor 1989b, 105). Following Irigaray, we might ask what manner of new social bonds might develop under the auspices of a vision of the good attributed to a "neuter" self? Neither gender, nor sexuality, is considered to merit consideration as elements of either "strong evaluation" or the articulation of a "best account" by Taylor.

I argue that in light of Taylor's neglect of gender and sexual difference in his model of moral identity development and articulation, it is well within reason to conclude that the "new understandings of good" which he attributes to the modern self, perpetuates the delusion of the "neuter" *genre*. Taylor's emphasis upon the elemental orientating relationship between the self and the good would appear to make the good the true other of the self. Irigaray has made us aware of the danger born of an I, or self, unaware of their own "corporeality", and their position amongst others as a gendered/sexed, differentiated, particular, and responsible moral agent. Reading Taylor through the prism of feminist critique problematizes Taylor's notion of embodiment. In ignoring gender, Taylor's concept of the moral agent, and the "best account" they articulate, evinces a

disengagement from the historical and cultural particularities attached to gender. In a strong sense, feminist critique confronts us with the body which is abstracted in Taylor's theory of embodiment.

### On Difference

The picture of the self which emerges from Taylor's work in *Sources* appears indifferent to difference. The Taylorian self is overwhelmingly concerned with plotting its own transitions toward more lucid and coherent visions and articulations of its own moral identity through the expression of "best accounts". The passive indifference toward others evinced in Taylor's model of the self is best expressed in his statements regarding incommensurability and universality.

It may be that our contact with certain cultures will force us to recognize incommensurability, as against simply a balance of goods- and bads- for- everyone that we cannot definitively weigh up. But we certainly shouldn't assume this is so a priori.

Until we meet this limit, there is no reason not to think of the goods we are trying to define and criticize as universal, provided we afford the same status to those of other societies we are trying to understand. This does *not* mean of course that all our, or all their, supposed goods will turn out at the end of the day to be defensible as such; just that we don't start with a preshrunk moral universe in which we take as given that their goods have nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to them. (Taylor 1989b, 62)

Taylor manages to squeeze a great deal of slippery argument into a small passage here. A passage which I contend requires a good deal of unpacking. On the surface, Taylor seems to advance a case for a type of relative universalism. He lays a veneer of mutuality over the encounter between conflicting visions of the good, which allows for the possibility of a productive discourse taking place between rival moral worldviews, all the while gingerly side stepping any actual risk to the agents' respective moral accounts. If, as Taylor suggests, we enter into discourse with agents whose "best account" is

radically different from our own, with the option that once we meet what Taylor considers the “limit” of commensurability we may retreat into our original position thought of as “universal” for us, thus categorizing our opponents stance as “universal” for them, are we not simply adopting an ethos of moral isolationism? What standard of definition and critique does Taylor envision framing discourse between rival moral accounts? Further, although Taylor does not set out from a position within “a preshrunk moral universe in which we take as given that their goods have nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to them”, his conditions of incommensurability and relative universalism certainly allow that we may legitimately conclude “that their goods have nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to them.”

The isolationist stance which I argue Taylor reserves for moral agents engaged in discourse who reach the “limit” of commensurability, is a necessary consequence of the manner in which Taylor asserts the self initially develops moral identity. Taylor establishes his model of moral identity development upon the pillars of intuition and practical reasoning. At present, our concern lies with Taylor’s construal of practical reasoning as it is directly tied to the embodied dimension of Taylor’s model. As I have argued over the course of the previous chapters, Taylor advances an epistemological program based upon the possibility of agents transitioning toward better accounts of their vision of the good. Taylor’s explanation appears imminently reasonable in so far as he describes this process as “a reasoning in transitions” which “aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other”, as such, it is concerned “with comparative propositions” (Taylor 1989b, 72).

The play of comparative reasoning seems quite practical for an agent seeking to orient themselves in the space of moral questions. I argue that what precedes Taylor's description of practical, comparative reasoning in this passage, is representative of the root of the isolationism which characterizes Taylor's portrayal of encounters with difference between moral agents. In his strong defence of practical reasoning, Taylor questions the modern desire to develop a rational mode for establishing the superiority of a given view (Taylor 1989b, 71). Taylor concludes that such either/or reasoning constitutes a false choice.

But if our moral ontology springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at, and if this account must be in anthropocentric terms, terms which relate to the meanings things have for us, then the demand to start outside of all such meanings, not to rely on our moral intuitions or on what we find morally moving, is in fact a proposal to change the subject. (Taylor 1989b, 72)

Taylor asserts that, *contra* naturalist languages which attempt to devise a disengaged, objective grammar for moral reasoning; we ought instead to subscribe to an intuitive, expressive grammar. Here the question of authenticity looms large. If we follow the naturalist path, Taylor suggests that we are avoiding dealing with the subject at hand. Worse still, to ignore our moral intuitions implies being haunted by the sense of living inauthentic and undignified lives. I find Taylor's indictment of disengagement convincing. Yet, I am troubled by certain aspects of his arguments, and the consequences such a perspective entails for the possibility of discourse.

Taylor demands that we deal in anthropocentric terms. Yet he includes no consideration of gender in his reflections on "human agency". Furthermore, Taylor suggests that we navigate the space of moral questions, reasoning in terms which have meaning for us, that correspond to our strong intuitions and the goods which move us. In

light of this, I am compelled to ask, is Taylor referring to terms which have meaning for us as agents born into normalizing traditions, who have inherited languages shaped by particular socio-historical and political circumstances? and if so, how can we possibly accede to Taylor's claim that there is "no reason not to think of the goods we are trying to define and criticize as universal, provided we afford the same status to those of other societies we are trying to understand" (Taylor 1989b, 62).

If our accounts must be in anthropocentric terms, then these accounts must also necessarily include all the particular differences inherent in our anthropologies. I have no doubt that each group might be able to treat their own goods as universal, but I have serious doubts about whether we could accord the same treatment to the goods of others. This mutually exclusive universalism strains credulity. More disconcerting is Taylor's suggestion that "our moral ontology springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at" (Taylor 1989b, 72). Does this mean that as each agent renders their own "best account", they commensurately produce a corresponding moral ontology? If so, how does the individual moral ontology jibe with the inherited communal moral ontology? It would certainly seem that the agent's opening onto the world is, for Taylor, profoundly rooted in their moral intuitions.

My perspective is defined by the moral intuitions I have, by what I am morally moved by. If I abstract from this, I become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all. You will only convince me by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story, of the transitions I have lived through—or perhaps refused to live through. (Taylor 1989b, 73)

The moral ontology this passage points to is one deeply set within the inner life of the agent. Although, Taylor still seems to leave the door open to dialogue in allowing that an(other) might convince an agent to change their position based on showing the agent

that their reading of their own experience is mistaken. This constitutes no mean feat, as it basically demands convincing an agent to transition to a more lucid view of their own life experience. Yet, in some ways an agent's view is their experience. Thus, to convince them to change their view requires that they also acknowledge that their whole approach to life has been in some way "wrong". The effort to sway an agent to change their position through discourse becomes absolutely Herculean if we follow Taylor's assertion that the "best account principle" defines the boundaries of any outside critique of an agent's moral worldview. In weighing whether one's sense of the worthiness of a moral source is derived from its, "infinite" value, or rather from a more base desire which projects a "seemingly exalted status on some object", Taylor invokes his "best account principle".

The only way to decide is by raising this or that particular critique. Is there a transition out of my present belief which turns on an error-reducing move? Do I have to recognize, for instance, that previously unavowed fears and desires of a discreditable kind have been lending lustre to this good, which it quite losses when these are factored out? What successfully resists all such critique is my (provisionally) best account. There is nothing better I could conceivably have to go on. Or my critics either for that matter. So says the BA principle. (Taylor 1989b, 74)

In this passage, Taylor renders a picture of the agent as the ultimate arbiter over their moral ontology. The notion that the Taylorian agent self-reads is a given. Taylor's concepts of transition and "strong evaluation" depend upon self-reading (ibid). That the "best account" resists not only self-critique, but also the critique of others intuitively something all-together different. Taylor admonishes the reader not to "start with a preshrunk moral universe" when encountering difference (Taylor 1989b, 62). Yet, following Taylor's theory of the "best account" it appears that we have recourse to resist critique through an appeal to our preshrunk moral vocabularies. Taylor claims that

“through language we remain related to partners of discourse, either in real, live exchanges, or in indirect confrontations” (Taylor 1989b, 38). However, if we follow Taylor’s criteria of the “best account principle”, we never really run the risk of putting our vision of the good at stake when we engage in discourse with others. In *Sources*, Taylor describes the importance of agents’ “qualitative distinctions” for defining their orientation in the space of moral questions. Taylor concludes that these represent “contestable answers to inescapable questions” (Taylor 1989b, 41). However, if we adhere to the standard for critique set up by Taylor’s “best account principle”, it appears that how contestable the answers to these inescapable questions are judged to be, ultimately depends upon agents’ self-reading.

In *La Philosophie Morale et Politique de Charles Taylor*, Bernard Gagnon offers an eloquent description of the relationship between the self and the ontological in Taylor’s moral philosophy. Playing off of the disengaged perspective of naturalism, Gagnon explains how Taylor’s engaged, moral realism renders the essence of moral consideration an integral element in practical reasoning and articulation.

L’imagination créatrice de l’homme a ainsi son importance dans l’affirmation de ces vérités, car la possibilité d’un regard absolu sur les choses en soi nous est aussi fermée que celle d’un regard pur sur soi; la redécouverte de ces vérités premières ne peut prendre forme que dans une type particulier d’engagement, dans la façon dont nous incarnons dans la réalité (mode de vie, pratique, institution) notre vision des choses. Or, à ce titre, une représentation peut être dite plus juste ou plus vraie qu’une autre si elle permet d’ouvrir des dimensions de notre perception qui autrement resteraient dans l’oubli. Le réalisme moral a donc trait aux considérations pratiques de notre regard sur les choses et concerne notre existence au monde. Essence et existence sont complémentaires: la relation que j’entretiens face à la première détermine en partie le mode de la seconde; de même que mon existence constitue aussi une ouverture particulière à l’essence. Cette dernière relation, l’existence comme ouverture aux essences, doit être reconnue dans nos jugements pratiques. (Gagnon 2002, 48)



Of particular importance in Gagnon's exegesis is the way in which he highlights how, for Taylor, our engaged perspective rooted in our embodied nature impacts the ways in which we bring to bear our visions of the good in our lives. Gagnon offers a rather poetic description of how Taylor's scheme has us incarnating our moral visions in reality.

#### On the "Fullness of Being"

I contend that Taylor's preoccupation with the capacity of the self to transition toward increasingly authentic and dignified identity stems from a Socratic influence regarding the fullness of being tied to articulation. Taylor's defence of the modern notion of authenticity is also bound up with this sense of taking the measure of being (Taylor 1991b, 82). Taylor's concept of articulation and "best account" is a fruit born not too far from the Socratic tree. Taylor's moral theory hinges upon the quest of agents to refine their accounts of what goods command their love and reverence. In asking why we bother trying to articulate our sense of the good, Taylor employs a rhetorical question as a means of delivering a claim about moral agency.

There is, of course, a one-line Socratic answer to this. It emerges from a particular ethical view, or range of views, which sees reason, in the sense of the *logos*, of linguistic articulacy, as part of the *telos* of human beings. We aren't full beings in this perspective until we can say what moves us, what our lives are built around. (Taylor 1989b, 92)

Taylor acknowledges that he shares "some version of this conception" (*ibid.*). It is clear that Taylor's qualification of the "best account" as provisional in nature, intuits that the ultimate achievement of "full being" *tout court* is not a possibility that he would accept. It is also clear that Taylor's moral theory makes the quest for ever more lucid articulations of the moral sources that empower us as moral agents, imperative for

satisfying the demands of authenticity. Taylor's theory reflects a strong Socratic influence regarding the measure of the fullness of one's being as correlative to one's ability to express one's moral feelings; "The central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power" (ibid).

I find this Socratic element troubling. In a fashion similar to his inattention to gender consideration in Taylor's model of embodiment, his equation of "fullness of being" with the capacity to articulate a sophisticated account of one's feelings about the good, Taylor normalizes a model of moral agency that excludes whole classes of people. Taylor's Socratic inspired amalgam of full being and sophisticated articulacy, prevents whole swaths of agents from moving closer to the good, and thus, developing a fuller sense of being. There are a plethora of factors which may adversely impact the ability of an agent to articulate their sense of the good. Taylor's measure of "full being" operates on a sliding scale which uses a base degree of cognitive functioning assumed as a normal standard; but what of agents who fall short? Where do those agents who differ from the norm in relation to cognition fit into Taylor's scheme? What of agents categorized as autistic, or impaired? What of agents who, for material reasons, do not have access to the resources (i.e. education, technology, even nutrition) required to develop an erudite, refined, articulated ethos? I argue that based on Taylorian accounting these agents are destined never to measure up, as it were.

As in the case of Taylor's inattentiveness to gender in his discussion of embodied moral agency, I think that Taylor is guilty of a lack of thoughtfulness, rather than of a pre-meditated prejudice relative to the exclusive character of his measure of being. Lack of malice does not, however, diminish the harmfulness of devising a model of moral

agency, wherein physically and materially privileged agents, have an insurmountable head start over everyone else. Further, Taylor effectively takes quotidian norms regarding cognitive functioning and extends them into a metaphysical sub-structure governing moral agency. After all, if the quest toward authentic moral identity, and fullness of being, depends upon an ever more lucid and coherent expression of what goods move us emotionally, and orient us rationally, then it is the most articulate agents, the agents who are best at self reading, who will register highest on Taylor's Socratically weighted scale. Perhaps some will argue that I am ignoring the emphasis which Taylor places upon the dialogical nature of the self, or the ways which Taylor envisions the self as formed in conversation, (both aspects of Taylor's philosophical work which we have already explored in this dissertation). Taylor has developed an important description of the self as always already positioned as an interlocutor. Yet, his ultimate emphasis upon agents' moral development rooted in self-reading, ultimately weakens the influence of one's conversation partners. Taylor strongly argues against the characterization of the self as "primarily a subject of representations" (Taylor 1991a, 307). In contrast, Taylor presents tropes portraying the self as engaged in dialogical action.

Sawing and dancing are paradigm cases of dialogical actions. But there is frequently a dialogical level to actions that are otherwise merely coordinated. A conversation is a good example. Conversations with some degree of ease and intimacy move beyond mere coordination and have a common rhythm. The interlocutor not only listens but participates with head nodding and "unh-hunh" and the like, and at a certain point the "semantic turn" passes over to the other by a common movement. The appropriate moment is felt by both partners together in virtue of the common rhythm... An action is dialogical, in the sense I am using it, when it is effected by an integrated, nonindividual agent. This means that for those involved in it, its identity as this kind of action essentially depends upon the sharing of agency. These actions are constituted as such by a shared understanding among those who make up the common agent. (Taylor 1991a, 310-311)

Taylor makes a rather radical argument regarding shared agency in this passage, an argument I endorse. It is important to note, however, that the dialogical element of the self which Taylor is describing is the social agent, the agent out in the world engaging amongst other agents. Further, Taylor is using the term dialogical to colour interaction between agents. This is a long way from saying that the self's reckoning of its own position, relative to the good, is determined in a dialogical fashion. Taylor states that "human beings always have a sense of self, in this sense, that they situate themselves somewhere in ethical space" (Taylor 1991a, 306). This jibes with what we have already encountered in our examination of Taylor's line of argument in *Sources*. Thus, it appears that the dialogical aspect of the self which Taylor describes in his essay "The Dialogical Self" is primarily a means of arguing against the representationalist (quasi-Cartesian) paradigm of the self.

Taylor makes a similar case in his essay "The Person", wherein he impugns the "interiorisation" of the sense of self; "I also think that something has been lost in the interiorisation, particularly an understanding of the significance of being an interlocutor" (Taylor 1985a, 281). I have already attested to Taylor's avowal of the self as existing within "webs of interlocution" (Taylor 1989b 36). However, we encounter the limit of the dialogical in Taylor's assertion that "What successfully resists all such critique is my (provisionally) best account. There is nothing better I could conceivably have to go on. Or my critics either for that matter. So says the BA principle" (Taylor 1989b, 74). Furthermore, Taylor's emphasis upon the articulation of a "best account" as the primary means of measuring the fullness of one's authentic moral being, leaves very little room for the dialogical in one's reckoning themselves to be well oriented toward the good.

I am not suggesting that Taylor is advancing an atomistic model of the self as monad. Yet, he does draw a bright line separating the expression of the “best account” from the hurly-burly of discourse. Taylor imagines agents’ increasing sense of authenticity as grounded primarily upon error reducing, “self-reading” (Taylor 1995, 52). What becomes apparent is that Taylor’s concern as a moral philosopher has to do primarily with helping agents to realize their own fullness of being. Taylor’s rendering of the “best account” as a category of articulation which is ultimately protected from critique, portrays moral identity as founded upon a uniquely powerful relationship between each agent and the goods which they feel most empowering. Taylor pushes this insulated, reciprocal model even further by differentiating between how agents orient themselves toward “goods” vs. how they orient themselves toward “hypergoods”.

At this point the reader ought to be familiar with the place of goods in the Taylorian theoretical universe. We have examined how Taylor envisions goods as exercising a sort of moral magnetism, drawing agents toward them in the space of moral questions as empowering their senses of what it is good to be. Further, we have elucidated how reflection upon, and articulation of these goods allows agents to assess the fullness, authenticity and dignity of their own moral identities. Up until this point, I have limited my discussion of the tiered nature of Taylor’s concept of goods. However to continue our examination of Taylor’s moral theory, we must tackle his concept of the “hypergood”. Understanding the role of “hypergoods” in Taylor’s model will help us understand why he establishes a sense of “best accounts” as privileged ground; demanding that all interlocutors play by the discursive rules established by the “best account principle”. Our examination of “hypergoods” will also help to flesh out my

depiction of the Taylorian moral agent as primarily oriented toward concerns of personal authenticity, and the fullness of being.

In *Sources*, Taylor describes “hypergoods” as “higher goods”, which suggests a hierarchical structure within Taylor’s moral theory. This hierarchy is personal however; that is, it pertains only to individual agent’s apprehensions of where goods rank within their unique frameworks for orientating themselves within the space of moral questions.

Most of us not only live with many goods but find that we have to rank them, and in some cases, this ranking makes one of them of supreme importance relative to the others. Each of the goods I am talking about here is defined in a qualitative contrast, but some people live according to a higher-order contrast between such goods as well. They recognize the value of self-expression, of justice, of family life, of the worship of God, of ordinary decency, of sensitivity, and a host of others; but they consider one of these—perhaps their relation to God, or perhaps justice—as of overriding importance...

For those with a strong commitment to such a good, what it means is that this above all others provides the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives. While they recognize a whole range of qualitative distinctions, while all of these involve strong evaluation, so that they judge themselves and others by the degree they attain the goods concerned and admire or look down on people in function of this, nevertheless the one highest good has a special place. (Taylor 1989b, 62-63)

Although Taylor is careful to maintain that the allegiance to a “higher good” does not necessarily indicate an obsessive, single minded pursuit of the good, it is clear that the presence of a “higher good” in one’s framework does order all of the other goods. It is also evident, following Taylor, that such a “higher good” leaves a sizeable footprint upon the character of an agent’s “best account”. This influence is demonstrated by Taylor’s assertion that it is the orientation to this overarching good “which comes closest to defining my identity, and therefore my direction to this good is of unique importance to me” (Taylor 1989b, 63). Although Taylor endeavours to maintain the dynamic character of his theory in the face of such higher order goods, his description of the “best account”

as a tentative account, becomes problematic when one delves deeper into his construal of “hypergoods” as sources of the self.

Taylor warns of the worrying consequences which await agents devoted to such a “higher good” who find themselves unable to justify their lives as being in tune with, or moving toward their supreme good. Taylor describes the possible feelings of “despair”, and “unworthiness” which threaten to strike at the “very roots of my being as a person” (ibid), if one reads oneself as not measuring up to their most strongly valued good. This casts “higher goods” as integral to one’s sense of the self as dignified. Although one’s account may change, and is thus tentative, the presence of the “higher good” seems anything but tentative.

Richard Rorty used the example of the poet to raise the issue of the place of “higher goods” in Taylor’s portrait of the self. For his part, Rorty apprehends poets as exemplifying the human as “self-fashioner”, as opposed to Taylor’s view of the poet as someone who motions toward something other than themselves, or indeed other than human (Rorty 1989, 20). However, the other which Taylor has in mind here is not someone or something challenging our vision of the good, it is the very source of our vision. The other which Taylor envisions the poet motioning toward, is the “higher good” at the center of their moral ontology (Taylor 1989b, 492).

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— this is the continuing relevance of the Romantic doctrine of the symbol. (ibid)

Although the agent expresses, and thus shares their account, within “webs of interlocution”, the account remains a product of an inward oriented, intuitional, self-

clarifying evaluation. Rorty points to this passage from the latter half of *Sources* as evidence of Taylor's vision of the intertwining of the "hypergood" and the self. This raises questions regarding agents' reactions to difference. Taylor initially casts the devotion to "higher goods" as a feature of only some peoples' moral frameworks (Taylor 1989b, 62). Yet, he then contradicts himself by suggesting that all of us accede to some notion of a personally, incomparably higher good, which orders, and orients, our sense of authentic moral identity.

Even those of us who are not committed in so single-minded a way recognize higher goods. That is, we acknowledge second-order qualitative distinctions which define higher goods, on the basis of which we discriminate among other goods, attribute differential worth or importance to them, or determine when and if to follow them. Let me call higher-order goods of this kind 'hypergoods', i.e., goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about. (Taylor 1989b, 63)

Ruth Abbey takes note of this vacillation by Taylor, between the character of "hypergoods" in agents' frameworks as at one point optional, and at another, fundamental. Abbey wants to read Taylor as ultimately attaching "hypergoods" to only some peoples' moral identities. Abbey asserts that Taylor depicts some agents as ordering their moral ontology around a core "hypergood", while others "live their lives devoid of any sense of such a preponderant good" (Abbey 2000, 37). If this is correct, I contend it only serves as further evidence of the Socratic scale at work within Taylor's theory. After all, an agent capable of articulating a coherent, and ordered, "best account" of their vision of the good life, will surely register as living a more dignified and authentic moral life than the agent whose account is awash in an opaque sense of what they apprehend as meaningful, an account "devoid of any sense of such a preponderant good."



Taylor's appraisal of the power of "hypergoods" extends beyond their role ordering agents' moral frameworks. Taylor goes so far as to claim that the status of "hypergoods", "is just what defines the 'moral' in our culture: a set of ends or demands which not only have unique importance, but also override and allow us to judge others" (ibid). This begs the question; what kind of morality is at stake in the quest for moral identity described by Taylor in *Sources*? For his part, Taylor states that he wants to broaden the horizons of the moral in our culture beyond what he describes as the limitations of the "obligation" ethic inscribed in modern philosophy (Taylor 1989b, 64). Taylor announces his desire to expand the content of morality at the very outset of his writing in *Sources*; declaring that "We are all universalists now about respect for life and integrity" (Taylor 1989b, 6), and thus, we can assume that obligation is perhaps too myopic a definition for the moral. Here we can readily discern Taylor's concern for "what it is good to be", rather than the preoccupation with "what it is right to do" (Taylor 1989b, 3).

### Argument

I am compelled to ask, however, if Taylor's interpretation of "obligation" as a vestige of philosophical naturalism is not too narrow. Further, does Taylor's assertion of the universal "respect for life and integrity" not seem shockingly naïve? Taylor's sense that we need to move past the strict sense of morality as "defined purely in terms of respect for others" (Taylor 1989b, 14), is rooted in his belief that in the wake of the modern, universal "respect for life and integrity" we must look past the Kantian, humanist horizon toward a consideration of the other two axes of moral thinking, "our understandings of what makes a full life" and "the range of notions concerned with

dignity” (Taylor 1989b, 15). However, Taylor himself fails to consider the respect for others in his assumption of a homogeneous, sexless, genderless, cognitively normalized moral agent. I do not think Taylor is wrong including concerns for dignity and the fullness of life as proper subjects for moral thinking. However, in my reading, his overly optimistic declaration of universal respect for others as a given feature in contemporary western societies, coupled with his depiction of homogeneous moral agency, as well as his presentation of “hypergoods”, results in a sense of the self overly concerned with its own dignity and authenticity. It is on these grounds that I apprehend Taylor’s model of the self to exhibit certain, worryingly narcissistic traits.

It is not my intention here to accuse Taylor of slipping into a Cartesian model of interiority, or of advocating for the atomistic sense of agency tied to the vision of radical individualism. I acknowledge that Taylor’s model of the self is not self-sustaining. Further, I agree with commentators such as Nicholas H. Smith who assert that Taylor’s brand of hermeneutic philosophy firmly establishes that agents “can never achieve full self-possession. The thinking and acting subject is always already situated in the semantic dimension, and so subject to norms that are in some sense given” (Smith 2004, 41). Nevertheless, an agent can exist within “webs of interlocution”, and express themselves in a shared language, whilst still exercising a degree of self-reflection so focused upon a quest for authentic and dignified moral identity, as to be qualified as narcissistic<sup>22</sup>.

Furthermore, Taylor’s assertion that “our moral ontology springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at” (Taylor 1989b, 72), which we can infer is rooted in our relationship to our “hypergoods”, puts a rather logocentric sheen on his theory of articulation. Smith explains that for hermeneutic philosophers such as Taylor,

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<sup>22</sup> Please see pg. 10 of the Introduction of this dissertation for a clarification of my use of this term.

“language is at once and indivisibly the medium through which we think about the world (the semantic dimension in which truth and other norms hold sway) and the medium through which we create a world” (Smith 2004, 40). Taylor’s theory of the “best account” as founded upon an agent’s unique relationship with powerful moral goods, while commensurately serving as the font for the agent’s moral ontology, goes further than the hermeneutic view of the world as built upon common semantic themes. Taylor’s theory suggests that each agent creates their own moral world, as it were; and while they live amongst other agents, and express their visions of the good within “webs of interlocution”, each agent ultimately defines for themselves “what it is good to be”. This situation is codified in Taylor’s statement that “There is nothing better I could conceivably have to go on. Or my critics either for that matter. So says the BA principle (Taylor 1989b, 74).

I appreciate the philosophical hermeneutic view of the world as given and shaped in the semantic dimension. Crucially, however, I do not draw boundaries around the moral dimension the way that Taylor has done. Taylor presents agents as both embedded in “webs of interlocution”, while simultaneously engaged in a private relationship with their particular “goods”, and “hypergoods”. In the case of interlocution, Taylor argues that agents are firmly oriented toward one another in shared linguistic traditions which they inherit, and which set the normative standards of comprehensibility for the community. Yet, Taylor has reserved the semantic territory of the moral as particular to each agent; created through the articulation of their “best account”. In light of this, it is difficult to see how substantive a discussion between agents concerning what constitutes

the good might possibly be, based upon the criteria Taylor sets for critique, and reflection, *vis à vis* the “best account principle”.

This situation might be tenable for those who agree with Taylor regarding the universality of our “respect for life and integrity” (Taylor 1989b, 6). However, for those of us who view contemporary society in a somewhat less sanguine light based upon the continued manifestation of social injustice and material inequality, the demand to focus upon “respect for others” and our “obligations to other people” (Taylor 1989b, 14), continue to hold paramount importance as the work proper to moral philosophy. Taylor acknowledges that the “moral beliefs which cluster around the sense that human life is to be respected and that the prohibitions and obligations which this imposes on us are among the most weighty and serious in our lives” (ibid). Yet, following Taylor’s universalist statement, these moral beliefs can be considered a *de facto* feature of all modern agents’ worldviews, and thus for Taylor, they do not require much in the way of further thought, or articulation. Taylor is much more interested in the questions of “how I am going to live my life which touch on the issue of what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfill the promise implicit in my particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life” (ibid).

It is my contention that we must not divide the moral in the way Taylor has, i.e., between obligation to others, the measure of fullness, and the sense of the self as dignified and authentic (Taylor 1989b, 15). I strongly believe that Taylor’s emphasis upon the expressive dimension of moral thought, characterized as a “best account”, holds a great deal of promise. As a philosopher who continues to be troubled by the inequity

present in our quotidian lives, however, I feel that this feature of Taylor's theory might better be marshaled in an attempt to develop a salient expression of the imperative that moral agents orient their "best account" toward accountability, rather than authenticity.

In order to explore the possibility of re-imagining Taylor's concept of the "best account" in such a light, I will embark, in the next chapter, upon a critical and comparative reading of Taylor's work alongside that of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In playing Levinas off of Taylor, and vice versa, I will explore questions, and possible insights, that may be gleaned from a critical and comparative reading of Levinas' and Taylor's respective *ouvrés*.

## Chapter Five

### Investigating Accountability

It is not possible for there to be no masters and servants, but let me also be the servant of my servants, the same as they are to me.

(Dostoevsky 1990, 289)

In this, the final chapter of my dissertation, I will undertake a speculative investigation into the possibility of a description of moral agency born of elements derived from the work of Charles Taylor and Emmanuel Levinas. I wish to make it clear that I am not claiming to have produced a consensus position on the nature of the good through a synthesis of their respective theories. Such a syncretic enterprise would, I contend, be doomed from the start by the irreconcilability of their respective arguments.

Consequently, it is important to state that it is not my goal to portray Taylor's moral paradigm as amenable to a Levinasian notion of archaic responsibility. Nor am I suggesting that Levinas' ethics might somehow be translated into a model for practical reasoning. Anyone who has had the pleasure of reading these philosophers' respective works would, I believe, discount the possibility of finding agreement between their wildly divergent positions regarding the character of the self, and the nature of the good. In this chapter I am not alleging to speak for either Taylor or Levinas. The voice here is my own. With that said, I borrow ideas and concepts freely from both Levinas and Taylor. I have mined their respective works to provide the substance for my re-imagining Taylor's "best account" from an articulation of authentic moral identity based upon self-reading, to an articulation of one's accountability born of our "being in the world" amongst others.

I am not the first writer, (nor do I imagine that I will be the last), to subject the thought of Taylor and Levinas to a comparative analysis. Nicholas H. Smith references Emmanuel Levinas in his essay “Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition”, which appeared in Ruth Abbey’s volume *Charles Taylor*. Smith’s discussion, although brief, does help to establish some of the common themes which allow for the tentative imagining of a possible conversation between Taylor’s and Levinas’ works. Smith assigns the thought of both Taylor and Levinas to the somewhat amorphous field of philosophical hermeneutics. This field is most explicitly tied to the (unfinished) theory of Martin Heidegger. However, it would be extremely problematic to describe either Levinas or Taylor as proponents of a Heideggerian hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup>

I contend that it is more fitting to apprehend Taylor and Levinas as in some ways responding to Heidegger’s forays into theorizing being, existence, experience, and understanding. Smith does a good job of laying out the blind spot in Heidegger’s hermeneutics which draws the attention of philosophers such as Levinas and Taylor who evince a particular concern for the ethical dimension of phenomenological investigation.

One of the central issues in the tradition of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics has been the question of its relation to ethics. Notoriously, Heidegger seemed to think that ethics could be left to itself once we situated ourselves properly in relation to Being, or as he almost formulated it in his earlier writings, once we achieved genuine (that is, “nonsubjectivist”) authenticity in our thought and action. If human beings are self- interpreting animals, our natures are not simply given to us. We must assume responsibility for our own existence, and whatever ethical orientation we have is only properly viewed in light of this self-responsibility.  
(Smith 2004, 42)

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<sup>23</sup> Levinas advances a variety of critiques of Heidegger in his works. Indeed, Levinas charges that Heidegger’s ontology “affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.” The consequence of which is that the “relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same.” (Levinas 1961, 45-46)

## On Ethics

Smith introduces Levinas as a philosopher who emphasized the “priority of ethics over ontology in a philosophical discourse”. Smith concludes his brief summary of Levinas’ perspective by stating that “it is far from clear how we are to interpret the concrete ethical implications of his hermeneutic endeavour – if indeed there are any” (Smith 2004, 43). Smith contrasts what he ascertains to be the “problematic relation between post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and ethics” evinced in Levinas’ work (along with that of Sartre) with the lucidity of Taylor’s contribution to the field. Smith credits Taylor with bringing an “explicit moral perspective... to the post-Heideggerian thesis that human beings are self-interpreting animals” (ibid).

To be fair to Smith, his essay is primarily concerned with Charles Taylor and his place within the post-Heideggerian hermeneutic tradition. Hence, Levinas’ brief cameo in Smith’s discussion serves primarily to illustrate, through contrast, the lucidity of Taylor’s focus upon an “explicit moral perspective” within the phenomenological tradition. Nevertheless, if one’s only encounter with Levinas was in the context of Smith’s essay, as a philosopher unconcerned with authenticity, who privileged an interpretation of ethics as “giving oneself over to the other human being or ‘substituting’ for the Other”, one could not be blamed for presuming Levinas to be wholly unconcerned with either the self, or embodiment.

Smith asserts that for Levinas the relation of the self to the other, or better, “for the other”, is what is “primordial”, “rather than self-relation”, or “relation to Being” (ibid). I do not disagree with Smith on the point of the “for the other” as the “primordial” orientation in Levinas’ work. However, Smith goes on to conclude that, because Levinas



rejected the possibility of developing a discourse based upon this relation, he may consequently be portrayed, along with Heidegger and Sartre, as “at most a reluctant ethicist” because he was “just as averse as they are to talking about moral ‘values’ or ‘agency’” (ibid). Here, I argue that Smith misses out on a fundamental aspect of Levinas’ philosophy. Smith’s desire to contrast the “reluctance” of Levinas with the lucid, “explicitly moral perspective” (ibid), of Taylor, *vis à vis* their respective contributions to hermeneutics, ignores a radical difference separating the two philosophers’ projects.

As I explained in the first chapter of this dissertation, Levinas described ontology as the plane of the “said”.<sup>24</sup> *Contra* Smith, I assert that Levinas evinces no problems discussing “values” or “agency”. In fact, these are important concepts in Levinas’ description of the ontological plane and consciousness, which is “born as the presence of a third party”, someone other, than the I and the other (Levinas 1974, 160).

The foundation of consciousness is justice. Not that justice makes a preexisting meditation intervene. An event like meditation – synchronization, comparison, thematization – is the work of justice, of entry of the diachrony of proximity, of the signifyingness of saying into the synchrony of the said, a “fundamental historicity” in the sense of Merleau-Ponty. It is the necessary interruption of the Infinite being fixed in structures, community and totality. Synchronization is the act of consciousness which, through representation and the said, institutes “with the help of God,” the original locus of justice, a terrain common to me and the others where I am counted among them, that is where subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by the concurrence of duties and the concurrence of rights. But justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocable relationship with the other, always for the other, can become an other like the others.

(Levinas 1974, 160-161)

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<sup>24</sup> Please see chapter one pgs. 43-45 of this dissertation for my introduction of Levinas’ concept of the “said”.

Smith's labeling of Levinas as "at most a reluctant 'ethicist'" (Smith 2004, 43), is the consequence of employing a conventional definition of ethics as proscriptive, for describing a philosopher who rejected the very possibility of expressing ethics in a theme. However, as evinced in the above passage, Levinas cared a great deal about "values" such as justice, and the role of "agency" *qua* consciousness. To grasp the distinctions which Levinas made between ethics as "the one for the other", and justice as "an event like meditation-synchronization, comparison, thematization", one must wrestle with the differentiation between ontology and ethics in Levinas' philosophy.

Here again I am re-treading ground which I covered in discussing language and philosophy in the first chapter of my dissertation. I will revisit a portion of a passage I quoted from *Totality and Infinity* in my first chapter to help to elucidate how Levinas' re-imagining of ethics renders Smith's comments unfounded. This will also help to set the stage for how I apprehend a comparative engagement with Taylor's and Levinas' works to be possible.

Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as the basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane.  
(Levinas 1961, 201)

Levinas' use of the term "preexisting" in this passage is misleading, as he did not intend for a linear, or derivative relation between the ethical and the ontological planes to be supposed. Levinas makes this prohibition against temporalizing ethics clear in his assertion early on in *Otherwise Than Being* that time in its "recuperating temporalization, without time lost, without time to lose, and where the being of substance comes to pass – there must be signaled a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all

synchronization, a transcending diachrony” (Levinas 1974, 9). It is through this diachrony that a trace of ethics casts a shadow over the plane of ontology.

Diachrony, for Levinas, causes a disturbance in the totalizing drive of linear time. This disturbance troubles our sense of being at home in the world. Levinas’ notion of a “lapse of time that does not return” describes the haunting feeling that something “otherwise than being” impinges upon us. It is in this fashion that we can speak of ethics as transcendent in Levinas’ theory. For Levinas, ethics can never become a category of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> However, knowledge is not the sole means of perception tied to embodiment. As such, ethics may be felt as an anarchic force which troubles the consciousness of subjects with unreasonable demands. In this regard, ethics may be described as a weight bearing down upon agency, upsetting our peace of mind.

Levinas is a master of the use of poetic tropes and metaphors for alluding to the description of that which resists categorization. As such, it is important that we approach Levinas’ comments with a keen sense of how he understands ethics as “otherwise than being”, and thus, as unrepresentable, unpresent, and unmade. I contend that through Levinas we can envisage ethics as that which allows for the interruption of identity as self-interest, and morality as reciprocity.

Smith’s statement that (in regard to Levinas), it is “far from clear how we are to interpret the concrete ethical implications of his hermeneutic endeavour – if indeed there are any” (Smith 2004, 43), wildly misses the mark *vis-à-vis* the nature of Levinas’ “endeavour”. I believe Levinas would have been aghast at the prospect of someone reading “concrete ethical implications” into his work. Following Levinas, how could

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<sup>25</sup> Hilary Putnam has explored the description of Levinas as a “perfectionist” in this regard (Putnam 2008, 72).

anything concrete be fashioned from that which is “otherwise than being”, except through an entombment within the structures of totalizing self-consciousness? For Levinas, ethics is a summons which echoes through the cracks in the foundations of “concrete” moral paradigms.

The oneself has not issued from its own initiative, as it claims in the plays and figures of consciousness on the way to the unity of an Idea. In that Idea, coinciding with itself, free inasmuch as it is a totality which leaves nothing outside, and thus, fully reasonable, the oneself posits itself as an always convertible term in a relation, a self-consciousness. But the oneself is hypostatized in another way. It is bound in a knot that cannot be undone in a responsibility for others. This is an anarchic plot, for it is neither the underside of a freedom, a free commitment undertaken in a present or a past that could be remembered, nor slave’s alienation, despite the gestation of the other in the same, which this responsibility for the other signifies. In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique, in passivity from the start, having nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation. (Levinas 1974, 105)

Ipseity, in Levinas’ description, is oriented toward an anarchic responsibility for the other. Yet, the fulfillment of this responsibility is forever beyond the capacity of agents to satisfy it. It always remains a provocation which cannot be fully answered. I believe that this provocation has the potential to thrust agents out of the self-interested mode of moral reasoning which I have argued develops in Taylor’s description of moral agency. To grasp how such a movement out of self-interested moral agency might be effected, requires an examination of how Levinas uses the trope of transcendence in his work.

Levinas makes a salient statement regarding the ground shared between the oneself as responsible, and the possibility of transcendence in the section entitled “Substitution” in *Otherwise than Being*. It is crucial that one grasp how Levinas’ theory

pivots around the notion of disrupting the normative conception of temporal linearity. This disruption arises from the overflowing sense of responsibility for the other, felt by the oneself, which defies any realistic expectation of fulfillment. Further, one must also apprehend the non-voluntary character of this responsibility. The agent is not offered a choice with regard to this responsibility; it simply is. Here we encounter the genius of Levinas' usurpation of the model of the self-realizing agent.

To be without a choice can seem to be violence only to an abusive or hasty and imprudent reflection, for it precedes the freedom non-freedom couple, but thereby sets up a vocation that goes beyond the limited and egoist fate of him who is only for-himself, and washes his hands of the faults and misfortunes that do not begin in his own freedom or in his present. (Levinas 1974, 116)

For Levinas, choice and freedom are features of being. As such, agents are free to choose to ignore the provocation to be responsible; thus, "washing" their hands of any non-reciprocal duty to others. However, making this choice does not release one from being responsible. Choosing to ignore the provocation to be responsible merely constitutes a decision to dwell within the limits of the "egoist fate of him who is only for-himself" (ibid). The "egoist fate" suggests an in-dwelling form of agency fixated on self-interested reduction of everything to same. In contrast to the "egoist fate" Levinas presents a picture of the responsible I, and the transcendence of being.

Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom... The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others. Nothing is a game. Thus being is transcended." (Levinas 1974, 116-117)

Levinas did not envision "substitution" as either a possible, or an appropriate, course of action on the "plane of ontology". However, the choice to respond to the provocation to be responsible, despite the impossibility of meeting the demand, does indeed constitute a possible course of action on the "plane of ontology". As such, the

“egoist fate” can be combatted through a sincere effort to be responsible, to strive to become a “non-interchangeable I”. The effort to be responsible, to express one’s culpability without consideration for reciprocity, orients one toward what Levinas describes as the adventure of transcendence. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas offers a description of goodness, and its relation to transcendence, being, the “face to face”, and the “third party”. This passage is particularly interesting when read against Taylor’s description of goods in *Sources*.

The face to face is not a modality of coexistence nor even of the knowledge (itself panoramic) one term can have of another, but is the primordial production of being on which all the possible collocations of terms are founded. The revelation of the third party, ineluctable in the face, is produced only through the face. Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of a collectivity presenting itself panoramically, to be absorbed into it. It concerns a being which is revealed in a face, but thus it does not have eternity without commencement. It has a principle, an origin, issues from an I, is subjective. It is not regulated by the principles inscribed in the nature of a particular being that manifests it (for thus it would still proceed from universality and would not respond to the face), nor in the codes of the State. It consists in going where no clarifying—that is, panoramic—thought precedes, in going without knowing where. An absolute adventure, in a primal imprudence, goodness is transcendence itself. Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face.

(Levinas 1961, 305)

For Levinas goodness “issues from an I, is subjective.” Further, goodness requires a going forward without prior reflection. In contrast, Taylor dwells upon notions of goods as beacons which orient agents in the space of moral questions. A space which, following Levinas, I apprehend to be “panoramic”. Following Taylor agents reflect upon, and clarify goods, through “best accounts” expressed in terms which become “indispensable” for “making sense of their lives” (Taylor 1989b, 58). Taylor’s concern for themes such as “dignity” (Taylor 1989b, 57), as apropos to an agent’s “best account” of their vision of the good life elicits a sense of the “egoist fate”. Further, I argue that Taylor’s self-

interested model of moral agency displays symptoms of the “*conatus* of beings” (Levinas 1974, 4). That is, the overriding self-interest of an ego driven by an existential desire for persistence.

No doubt Taylor would disagree with this characterization. Taylor presents “dignity” as the fruit of a “search for clairvoyance” on the part of the agent in the quest for authentic moral identity. Reading Taylor’s use of clairvoyance against his injunction that “the self’s interpretations can never be fully explicit. Full articulacy is an impossibility” (Taylor 1989b, 34), we can conclude that full clairvoyance also constitutes an impossibility. However, as with articulation the impossibility of reaching full clairvoyance does not, in Taylor’s view, taint the fruit of partial, increased clairvoyance, measured in terms such as “dignity”, or “authenticity”. For Taylor, the quest for clairvoyance represents a means of dealing with the inescapability of “being in the world”/ “*être au monde*”, after the fashion of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

In “Overcoming Epistemology” Taylor states that “We can’t turn the background against which we think into an object for us. The task of reason has to be conceived quite differently: as that of articulating the background, ‘disclosing’ what it involves” (Taylor 1995, 12). The concept of “disclosure” in Taylorian theory, functions according to a Kantian inspired scheme of transcendental deduction and argument. Taylor follows Kant in focusing attention upon agents’ experiences of knowledge as oriented toward the meaning which objects have for the agents engaged with them. Commensurately, Taylor takes a dim view of philosophical empiricism and its search for the meaning which objects may possess in and of themselves. Taylor’s attitude is strongly evinced in the

differentiation between the bailiwick of empirical science, and that of the philosophical study of the self and morality, with which he is concerned in *Sources*.

Of course, the terms of our best account will never figure in a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. This is the complement to the anti-Aristotelian purge of natural science in the seventeenth century. Just as physical science is no longer anthropocentric, so human science can no longer be couched in the terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with. (Taylor 1989b, 59)

### On Transcendence and the Transcendental

This harkens to a point I made in the second chapter of this dissertation, wherein I employed the same passage as evidence of Taylor's moral realist position *contra* philosophical naturalism.<sup>26</sup> Taylor's realism is intractably intertwined with his notion of transcendental reflection. Taylor's "best account principle" is born of this marriage. The "best account" expresses the degrees to which the agent is able to "disclose" the background against which they apprehend the world as meaningful, and their life as good. I believe some interesting insights regarding descriptions of moral agency may be derived by contrasting Levinas' emphasis upon the provocation to transcend, and Taylor's focus upon the importance of transcendental reflection. I argue that contrasting these very different concepts against one another opens a window onto imagining "best account" otherwise than an account of authentic moral identity.

Levinas presents the provocation of ethics, to be responsible beyond all reason, as allowing for transcendence as an "adventure", going out toward others, "going without knowing where" (Levinas 1961, 305). Levinas' use of transcendence evinces a religious

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<sup>26</sup> Please see chapter two pgs. 71-72 of this dissertation.



etymology, rooted in the play between the finite and the infinite. For Levinas, transcendence forces us to acknowledge that which is beyond self-interested being. For Taylor, an agent who feels provoked to responsibility would do well to first reflect upon the source of this provocation, and then disclose the background against which they comprehend it, and arrange it within the framework they employ to orient themselves within the space of moral questions. The Taylorian agent reduces the provocation to a feature of their own moral ontology through a *genre* of transcendental reflection. Taylor's model of transitional gains in knowledge and self-understanding represent the means through which he proposes we empower ourselves as moral agents by exploring "the limits of the conceivable in human life" and developing an "account of its 'transcendental conditions'" (Taylor 1989b, 32).

Levinas charges subjects with the mission of going forth to meet their responsibility prior to knowing why, or questioning for whom. Taylor, advises agents that the strongly valued goods which they bring to the light of knowledge through "disclosure", are integral to their identity as authentic selves. Further, Taylor asserts that these goods frame one's judgments and actions, and set the standard for what is real for each moral agent.

What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices. By this token, what you can't help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get a grasp of at present. Your general metaphysical picture of "values" and their place in "reality" ought to be based on what you find real in this way. It couldn't conceivably be the basis of an *objection* to its reality. (Taylor 1989b, 59)

The picture of reality Taylor lays out in this passage is rooted in his reading of Kant as providing the framework for the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty; a relation Taylor explores in his essay, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments". In this essay,

Taylor advances a powerful model of human understanding as embodied. Taylor proceeds to argue that “a proof that we are inescapably embodied agents to ourselves does show the form that any account must take which invokes our own self-understanding” (Taylor 1995, 27). The “form of account” which Taylor contends is unavoidable for human beings as embodied agents, is that which expresses one’s “general metaphysical picture of ‘values’ and their place in ‘reality’”. This account (a “best account”) is developed through the use of a transcendental deduction which takes as its evidence that which one “can’t help having recourse to in life” (Taylor 1989b, 59).

Taylor asserts that the premise upon which we embark on our transcendental reflections are, at best, “sketchy”. In this light, we can read the first part of *Sources* as a theoretical schematic for bringing to awareness the “indispensable” sources of meaning from the background of experience.

So we start off with a sketchy characterization which can be seen right off as a formulation of a limiting condition: say that experience must be *of* something. Then we go on to show that this involves experience having coherence; and then we try to show that this coherence must consist in the applicability of the categories. But there is nothing sacred about the number of steps...

Indeed, the first stage is different in nothing from the later stages, except in being easier to grasp. It appears self-evident; but the later steps must also be made to appear self-evident. They constitute indispensability claims, but so does the first stage. The big change is that the argument moves us from weaker to stronger thesis, from experience being *of* something to the applicability of the categories... We try to show that the richer description’s holding is indispensable to the sketchier one’s holding, because the former simply spells out what the latter adumbrates. (Taylor 1995, 32)

Taylor believes that through transitional gains in knowledge, agents can push out the boundaries of the “limits of the conceivable in human life” and improve the “account of its “transcendental conditions” (Taylor 1989b, 32). The ultimate goal of undertaking these reflections in Taylor’s work is to arrive at increasingly clairvoyant expressions of

self-understanding. Commensurately, this understanding allows for agents to develop a more authentic and dignified sense of self. Nicholas Smith provides support for this conclusion in his assertion that “for Taylor, in important cases our self-understanding constitutes who we are. There are feelings, moods, and social relations that are shaped through the way we articulate or express them” (Smith 2004, 43). Smith goes on to distill an important point concerning the moral dimension of Taylor’s philosophy. The tenor of Taylor’s discourse readily lends itself to a misreading of terms such as good/hypergood, moral, worth, etc. Smith points out that far from offering a moralizing vocabulary with specific value criteria, in Taylor’s scheme “All that is needed to have a self or identity constituted by moral concerns is for some desires and purposes to matter because of their worth. But that worth need not be “moral” in the narrow sense, say, of being dutiful, or altruistic, or benevolent” (Smith 2004, 44).

Smith’s reading echoes Taylor’s remarks regarding the inattention of modern moral philosophy *vis-à-vis* “what it is good to be” in *Sources* (Taylor 1989b, 3). Thus, we can see that, for Taylor, transcendental reflection allows agents to increase their feelings of dignified and authentic selfhood through the clarification of the goods which empower their moral ontologies. Thus equipped, the Taylorian agent engaged in what I have been calling Taylor’s “transitional epistemology” is able to express increasingly lucid understandings of their “metaphysical picture” of “values”; *ipso facto* increased self-clarity.

As noted above, Smith claims that Levinas is “at most a reluctant ‘ethicist’” and that *par contre*, Taylor voices an “explicitly moral perspective”. However, based upon our exploration of Taylor’s and Levinas’ respective descriptions of moral agency, I

contend that the precise implications of being an “ethicist”, or of exercising a “moral perspective”, depend upon how one interprets the terms ethics and moral.

To further our comparative examination of Taylor and Levinas, it will be helpful to consider some aspects of the analysis advanced by Philip J. Harold in his book *Prophetic Politics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Sanctification of Suffering*. Harold undertakes a rare discussion of Levinas’ philosophy alongside Taylor’s thinking about ethics and articulation. I must admit that I harbor some reservations regarding Harold’s readings of certain Levinasian tropes, such as “substitution” (Harold 2009, 171), and the possibility of a politics being distilled from Levinasian disinterestedness (Harold 2009, 215); even a “prophetic politics”. However, despite my uneasiness with Harold’s overarching argument, I find value in his work. Harold triangulates a point of contact between Levinas and Taylor using values, speech, and ontology.

Levinas’s late philosophy holds out for a responsibility unable to be thematized in ontological discourse. While for Levinas ontological discourse as a whole ultimately fails to account for human uniqueness and its resources are incapable of reaching the true responsibility one has for one’s neighbor, it does have an important role to play. A subjective theory of value, a procedural conception of justice, a reduction of everything to human choice, all fail to come to grips with how we in fact live our lives, to wit, in search of a good that we understand to be no mere illusion or fantasy, which we can describe in ontological language. Human values are indispensable and are valid independently of our choice, and here Levinas is in line with Taylor. (Harold 2009, 154)

Harold adds a qualifier to this point of contact between Levinas and Taylor.

Although both Taylor and Levinas share a real concern for the expression of human values, Levinas *contra* Taylor does not grant “ontological language a foundational role”. Furthermore, Harold asserts that Taylor’s construal of values as goods/hypergoods orienting agents’ moral attitudes and grounding them in “conscious knowledge”, represents “what Levinas strains to oppose” (ibid).

Harold provides a helpful framework for thinking about how Levinas' and Taylor's very different theoretical discourses may be used to develop a tentative description of a "best account" which expresses one's orientation in the space of moral questions toward something other than self-empowering goods. This is not to say that Harold provides a map for integrating Taylorian theory with Levinasian philosophy. As I have previously stated, such a synthesis would be a futile and presumptuous task. However, re-imagining the themes from both philosophers' works, substituting Taylor's focus on transcendental reflection with Levinas' emphasis upon transcendent provocation, would, I contend, present interesting possibilities for contemporary moral discourse.

#### Juxtaposition

Such a re-imagining necessitates a very careful negotiation of the central arguments made by Levinas and Taylor in their respective works. The results of this negotiation are sure to upset the sensibilities of the partisans attached to each philosopher. However, disturbance, discontent, and disruption, are often the most efficacious fuels for re-imagining. Furthermore, the description of moral agency which emerges from my effort makes no claims of orthodoxy in either case. And thus, both Taylorians and Levinasians are free to ignore it altogether.

The comparative analysis of Taylor's and Levinas' moral theories is rife with complications. Even when the goal is expressly not one of synthesis, but rather of critical contrast, there are points at which the entire enterprise teeters on the edge of tenability. One such point is encountered in Taylor's critique of certain philosophical notions of morality and the self, oddly buried in an endnote of *Sources*. This critique, which I

contend should have been made much more explicitly by Taylor in the main body of *Sources*, includes a section targeting a moral theory which bears uncanny similarities to that advanced in Levinas' philosophical works.

In the first part of *Sources*, Taylor differentiates between the "right" and the "good". Taylor first presents the normative case of the priority of the right over the good as it is understood in "consequentialist theory" (Taylor 1989b, 89). The reader will not be shocked to learn that Taylor is not an advocate of consequentialism. Taylor argues that where the good means "whatever is marked out as higher by a qualitative distinction, then we could say that the reverse is the case, that in a sense, the good is always primary to the right" (ibid). Taylor's claim of the supremacy of the good over the right is built upon his understanding of agents' "qualitative distinctions" underlying their "best account" as constituting moral reality; "the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules which define the right"(ibid).

I contend that Taylor's scheme championing the good over the right is best understood as a *genre* of transcendental argument, as described above. Taylor works to bolster his claim by addressing three competing claims, all of which he categorizes as trumpeting the right over the good. First, Taylor tackles the Kantian inspired arguments for the right over the good, resting upon "weakly valued goods", which Taylor apprehends as keeping "its most basic insights inarticulate" (ibid). Taylor concludes that his theory is stronger than the Kantians stemming from the clarifying power of his model, which includes "qualitative distinctions" and "articulation". In short, Taylor apprehends his *genre* of transcendental argument as going further and deeper.

The second competing claim which Taylor confronts is “the thesis that morality is concerned only with what actions are obligatory and not with qualitative distinctions” (Taylor 1989b, 532-533). Taylor dismisses this theory based on the premise that its adherents are, in fact, moved by very strong hypergoods attached to modern, western sensibilities, i.e. “freedom, altruism, and universalism” (Taylor 1989b, 88). Taylor indicts the proponents of procedural ethics based upon obligatory action as being in a state of denial with regard to the goods which anchor their arguments. Taylor claims that these thinkers are “caught in a strange pragmatic contradiction, whereby the very goods which move them push them to deny or denature all such goods. They are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking. Their thought is inescapably cramped” (ibid).

The third competing claim presents a more formidable obstacle for Taylor in that it advances a vision of morality conceived in terms of our duty, or “obligation” to others (Taylor 1989b, 533). This vision of ethical life rooted in one’s “obligation to others” bares more than a passing resemblance to Levinas’ philosophy, although Taylor never mentions Levinas by name. Taylor acknowledges that this claim openly avows its source, and hence, does not fall afoul of his criteria regarding the proper apprehension of the “nature of morality.” Furthermore, Taylor allows that the notion of an ethical life as a life of obligation to others “turns on a real distinction, in that we can discern these different kinds of demands in our ethical life” (ibid). However, despite Taylor’s acceptance of the validity of the conceptual grounds upon which the demand to serve others is based; he objects to it on what I argue are moral grounds.

Taylor evinces a consistent concern for what he suggests is the “health” of the self. Commensurately, he casts a wary eye on any vision of morality which he discerns to be empowered by hypergoods which “exact a price of self-mutilation” (Taylor 1989b, 107). Taylor’s allusion to “self-mutilation” provides a particularly disturbing sense of the perils which he believes lay in wait for agents on the quest for authentic selfhood. Taylor’s project, read through the lens of his own theory, evinces its own hypergoods. The strongest of these is the possibility of the ongoing development of an authentic, dignified understanding of the self through transitions rooted in practical reasoning, and the articulation of “best accounts”. Hence, when Taylor charges that the notion of an ethical life as one devoted to others exhibits “something hubristic and self-destructive in the attempt to carry this exclusive choice consistently through, a forgetfulness of self which aspires beyond human powers” (Taylor 1989b, 533). I contend that his objection is on moral grounds.

Taylor does not explicitly invoke Levinas in his critique of the “obligation” ethos. Nevertheless, since Taylor describes a theory of obligation similar to Levinas’, it might be fruitful to examine how Taylor’s warning against the “hubristic” and “self-destructive” consequences of such an “obligation” ethos squares up against Levinas’ description of “responsibility for the other”.

It is not that the entry of a third party would be an empirical fact, and that my responsibility for the other finds itself constrained to a calculus by the “force of things.” In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession calls out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness. A face obsesses and shows itself, between transcendence and visibility/invisibility. Signification signifies in justice, but also, more ancient than itself and the equality implied by it, justice passes by justice in my responsibility for the other, in my inequality with respect to him for whom I am a hostage.

(Levinas 1974, 158)



Doubtless, Levinas' hostage trope could be read as "self-mutilation", evoking themes of sacrifice and denial. However, I argue that such a reading would be wrongheaded in that it fails to take into account Levinas' consideration of the "third" and the requirements of justice. Harold provides a lucid description of how Levinas conceived of the disparity between "saying" and the "plane of the ethical", and the "said" of the "ontological plane"; "there is no pure realm of the ethical, as the entrance of the third has always already taken place and the ethical work of justice involves both the saying and the said *together*" (Harold 2009, 153). Thus, the provocation to absolute responsibility of "the one for other" is tempered by the necessity of doing justice for "all the others".

The relationship with the third is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. There is weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which it is conveyed before us. There is betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relationship with it: it is only thanks to God that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by the others, that is, "for myself." "Thanks to God" I am an other for the others.  
(Levinas 1974, 158)

As Levinas states, it is "thanks to God" that one finds oneself "an other for the others." Not through choice, but something akin to providence. The question naturally arises, how does Levinas conceive of God in this scenario? Is Levinas invoking a paternalistic God? Or, perhaps, he is alluding to an esoteric divinity? Is Levinas' use of the term God meant to signify our "thrownness" into being? Does this passage express the quality of our state of being at once, both, subjects for ourselves and for others, just as others are subjects both for us and for themselves? Fortunately, Levinas provides us with a framework for interpreting the signification of the term "God" in his discourse.

God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor: the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity. The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society. (ibid)

It seems to me that Levinas' description here, of "this aid or this grace" which makes us responsible for others, but also makes others responsible for us (without our meriting it) staves off the horrific prospect of "self-mutilation" or "self-destruction" with which Taylor is concerned. Further, Levinas' assertion that the provocation to be responsible, which pushes us toward a transcendence of self-interested being, allows us to reflect upon our "inequality" with she for whom we are responsible, should assuage any fear of "hubris" being born of "obligation". Of course Taylor could mark down this sense of "inequality" to "self-destructiveness", but again our "inequality" needs to be read against how our "relationship with the third is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at" (Levinas 1974, 158). The basic difference which emerges in the contrast between Taylor's and Levinas' moral theories turns upon what the self ought to be properly concerned with.

Taylor's arguments display a tremendous concern for describing how we are to apprehend our(selves) as the bearers of unique and authentic moral identities, and how the vigor of our moral identities depends upon the clarity of our self-reading and the expression of the moral sources which empower us. Levinas offers a rather different description of the self. One which Taylor would, I believe, adamantly reject.

That in the responsibility for another, the ego, already a self, already obsessed by the neighbor, would be unique and irreplaceable is what confirms its election. For the condition for, or the unconditionality of, the self does not begin in the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that would be, after the event, "compassionate" for another. Quite the contrary: the uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only *in* being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*. (Levinas 1974, 123)

Like Taylor, Levinas presents the self as unique. However, the uniqueness of the self for Levinas does not flow from self-understanding and self-expression; it is a uniqueness forged by being responsible prior to “auto-identification”. Here the contrast between Taylor and Levinas is extremely stark. I believe that Taylor’s model of the self epitomizes “auto-identification”, while Levinas works furiously to disrupt “auto-identification” with that which is other. Taylor’s notion of the self is preoccupied with the personal measure of authenticity; its moral identity is a reflection of the degree to which it lives up to its own values. Levinas’ model of the self is that of one whose self-reflection is disturbed by the call to accountability; morality here has to do with a going forth toward this call, and thus cannot be measured, nor used as a basis for identity after Taylor’s fashion.

Levinas is renowned for his nearly impenetrable style of writing. Taylor, on the other hand, is often lauded for his straight forward manner. On the surface these characterizations seem rather apropos. However, for all of Taylor’s salient argument regarding practical reasoning and articulation, there are some puzzling aspects to his choice of certain terms in “Identity and the Good”. As I noted earlier, Levinas often draws upon religious tropes and metaphors in his descriptions. Taylor, although not avoiding them altogether, employs religious tropes much more sparingly. Yet, at the conclusion of Taylor’s arguments in “Identity and the Good” Taylor chooses to close his case with an appeal to readers to “put an end to the stifling of the spirit and to the atrophy of so many of our spiritual sources” (Taylor 1989b, 107). Why the invocation of the spiritual here? Do “moral sources” not suffice?

Taylor makes reference to the “spiritual” and “spiritual sources” at various points in *Sources*. In laying out his agenda for “Identity and the Good” Taylor states that “In particular, what I want to bring out and examine is the richer background languages in which we set the basis and point of the moral obligations we acknowledge.” Taylor further clarifies his project asserting that, “More broadly, I want to explore the background picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which lies behind some of the moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries” (Taylor 1989b, 3-4). Taylor’s use of the terms “spiritual” and “spiritual sources”, in “Identity and the Good”, in some instances echoes his use of “moral sources” and at others, seems to differ from it. It is not clear whether the “background picture of our spiritual nature” is akin to his use of the trope of the “background” of our moral languages. Do they both signify what Taylor has described as the pool of “inarticulate understanding” (Taylor 1991a, 308), against which our representations are reflected back to us as intelligible?

With regard to moral language, Taylor’s “background” trope resonates with a Kantian notion of the slim premise upon which agents can begin to engage in transcendental reasoning. However, Taylor’s use of the term “spirit” and “spiritual sources” evokes a different sort of “background”.

If articulacy is to open us, to bring us out of the cramped postures of suppression, this is partly because it will allow us to acknowledge the full range of goods we live by. It is also because it will open us to our moral sources, to release their force in our lives. The cramped formulations of mainstream philosophy already represent denials, the sacrifice of one kind of good in favour of another, but frozen in a logical mould which prevents their even being put in question. Articulacy is a crucial condition of reconciliation.

Of course, if reconciliation is impossible, then articulacy will buy us much greater inner conflict. This might be thought a risk. But even in this case, we would have at least put an end to the stifling of the spirit and to the atrophy of so many of our spiritual sources which is the bane of modern naturalist culture.

(Taylor 1989b, 107)

Taylor speaks of releasing the force of moral sources in our lives through the articulation of “the full range of goods we live by.” Taylor links this expressive endeavour to the liberation of “the spirit”, and the unshackling of our “spiritual sources” from the yoke of modern naturalism. At this point in “Identity and the Good” Taylor has already built a vocabulary for making his case regarding agents’ need to orient themselves toward moral sources which correspond to their understanding of what constitutes a “worthwhile” life. Taylor also clearly explains why these sources must then be expressed in a “best account” which empowers agents’ sense of striving ever closer to their ideal of authentic moral identity; thus providing them with a sense of dignified selfhood. Why then, at the conclusion of this argument does Taylor invoke the “spirit” and the “spiritual”? Could this be an inference to the Romantics’ idea of the spirit of nature coursing through being, which Taylor treats at length in the second part of *Sources*? Or is it evidence of Taylor’s theistic sympathies?

#### Argument

I believe Taylor’s use of the “spirit” and “spiritual” “background” tropes allude to an aspect of moral identity which is not reducible to one’s moral ontology. Taylor’s choice of the “spiritual” suggests something not native to the ontological. Here a very tentative point of contact can be made with Levinas’ differentiation of the “ethical plane” and the “ontological plane”. However, tentative may be too generous a description since Taylor does not perceive the unbridgeable gulf between “spiritual sources” and expression, in the way that Levinas does the “saying” and the “said”.

Taylor believes that, not only might we express our “spiritual sources” via articulation, but we may even go so far as to “reconcile” the modern sense of the self as

self-determining, with the recognition that our sense of self “depends on what one can call a moral topography” (Taylor 1989b, 106). Following Taylor, I believe that language can act as a vehicle for the articulation of strongly felt moral and spiritual intuitions, even those for which we have only a vague and haunting impression. However, *contra* Taylor, I do not believe that the purpose of our endeavour to express these feelings ought to be geared toward a “reconciliation” with the ideal of modern subjects as the “bearers of individual rights” (ibid), and the empowerment of self-regarding, authentic moral identity. Quite the contrary, following Levinas, I hold that the force of what Taylor calls “spiritual sources” should be understood as disrupting and fragmenting the “auto-identification” upon which Taylor’s model of authentic selfhood depends.

Taylor’s project in “Identity and the Good” focuses upon developing a coherent theoretical framework for agents to understand them(selves) as oriented toward certain moral “goods” and “hypergoods”. Taylor’s arguments suggest that agents use this understanding to engage in an ongoing expressivist archeology. This archeology enables agents to unearth layers of meaning which fuel their “best accounts”, which in turn, empower their sense of living authentic and dignified lives. However, what if we were to interpret the sense in which Taylor wishes to put an “end to the stifling of the spirit” (Taylor 1989b, 107), as having nothing to do with the empowerment of the self, but rather as acknowledging a responsibility to something other than the realization of our own authentic moral identity? Under this rubric, could Taylor’s “spiritual sources” be apprehended as “unleashing” the overwhelming and irreconcilable sense of our responsibility to others as constituting the condition of our being subjects? My thinking

here is influenced by Levinas' statement that "Responsibility is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value" (ibid).

It is based upon this play between Taylor and Levinas that I venture the following. What if we were to interpret Taylor's expressivist model of the "best account", not as a means to pursue ever more lucid descriptions of our own moral ontologies, but rather under the auspices of Levinas' statement that "The philosophical speaking that betrays in its said the proximity it conveys before us still remains, as a saying, a proximity and a responsibility" (Levinas 1974, 168). What if we eschewed Taylor's hope that the "best account principle" might lead to "reconciliation" and "empowerment" of the self, and instead, embraced a Levinasian inspired ethos of the "best account principle" as a means for expressing our "assignation" to responsibility and accountability?

My line of argument here is based upon speculation, juxtaposition, and tentative description. As such, I do not claim that either Levinas', or Taylor's theories inevitably lead to the possibility which I am proposing.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas waxes poetic about the I and the other. He frames this discussion against the backdrop of infinity and describes the posture of the I as absolutely passive. The other is a revelation, and has a "positive structure: ethical. The first revelation of the other, presupposed in all the other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation" (Levinas 1961, 197). Levinas strove to write in an asymmetric fashion about the I and the other. However, the notion of relationality and response reverberate throughout his works. Based upon the tropes he uses, I believe we can develop a compelling vocabulary

for articulating a “best account” of our moral agency as founded upon accountability. An account wherein, following Robert Bernasconi’s analysis of Levinas’ dialogue with Martin Buber, a “trace of the saying is perhaps to be found in the said, just as the descriptions in *Totality and Infinity* serve to discover a trace of the infinite in the finite” (Bernasconi 1988, 128). I contend this lays the foundation for an understanding of an articulation of the (spiritual) intuition that moral agency is founded upon a provocation to be accountable.

Included in the same volume as Bernasconi’s essay on Levinas and Buber is an excellent interview with Levinas conducted by Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley. In the course of this interview Levinas expands upon his understanding of the I and the other, and the emergence of justice. Levinas asserts that the “interlocutor is first of all in this ethical posture by which my lips open for speech, or by which I am addressed. I am called upon to respond. I think that the first language is the response. But, with the appearance of the third – the third must also have a face. If the third is also a face, one must know whom to speak to first” (Wright, Hughes, and Ainley 1988, 174). In Levinas’ thinking, an ethical relation is impossible when the singularity of the face to face is shattered by the inevitable appearance of the face of the third, fourth, fifth and so on. The reason, according to Levinas, is that with the plurality of others comes the need for comparison and judgment, exercises in what Levinas deigns Greek thought and politics (ibid). However, Levinas values these actions as necessary, indeed as essential, for the work of justice on the “ontological plane”. In his response, Levinas anticipates the question regarding the need for a theory of ethics if justice always ultimately constitutes the ground of interrelation.



If everything terminates in justice, why tell this long story about the face, which is the opposite of justice? The first reason is that it is ethics which is the foundation of justice. Because justice is not the last word; within justice, we seek a better justice. (Wright, Hughes, and Ainley 1988, 175)

In re-imagining the “best account” as an expression of our moral agency founded upon our being accountable to others, prior to our concern for our own dignity, I am leaning heavily upon Levinas’ statement that “I think that the first language is the response” (Wright, Hughes, and Ainley 1988, 174). However, *contra* Levinas, I do not think that the language of response is necessarily complicated by the appearance of more than the one other. In using Taylor’s concept of the “best account principle”, our articulation of accountability signifies an expression of both a basic embodied feature of moral agency, as well as a starting point for increasingly more articulate accounts of the demands which stem from our being accountable; always allowing us to seek “a better justice”, a more just response.

I believe that a model for this sort of a “best account” is pointed toward in *Otherwise than Being*. In section d, entitled “Witness and Language” in chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas expounds on his notion of “substitution”, stating that it is a “pre-originary susceptibility” (Levinas 1974, 146). That is, “otherwise” to freedom and decision. To make his case Levinas cites a passage from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoyevsky’s rich characters and the themes of justice and culpability central to the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov*, provide fertile ground for thinking about morality and responsibility. Of particular note is the way in which Dostoyevsky’s handling of culpability may have influenced Levinas. It is important to note here that, in my opinion, Levinas’ concept of “culpability” is often misunderstood by Anglophone readers. This

misinterpretation is a result of the translation of Levinas' French term "*coupable*" as "guilty". The translator of *Otherwise than Being*, Alphonso Lingis, chose to translate "*coupable*" as "guilty". It is my contention that this decision has led to the confusion amongst Anglophone readers of the notion of culpability in the juridical sense, with guilt in the emotional sense. As an example of the dissonance which this translation causes in reading Levinas' work, I cite two passages from *Otherwise than Being*. The first evinces the exponential character of responsibility wherein "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialistic subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am" (Levinas 1974, 112). This passage could easily be read as importing the emotional sense of guilt into "anarchic" responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

However, to do so would be to undermine the crucial distinction which Levinas has painstakingly drawn between being and "otherwise than being". The consequence of this would be to allow an emotional sense of guilt to play a role in the "one-for-the-other", which would open a backdoor in Levinas' theory through which consciousness might stream in, thus rendering the other an object of consciousness. The danger here is that important facets of Levinas' philosophy are lost in translation. "*Coupable*" is more akin to culpable in English.

There are important differences between culpability and guilt. First, guilt is often attached to a self-regarding feeling or judgment. Culpability, *par contre*, may be read as being liable or responsible irrespective of one's feelings. Culpability doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the conscience. One may be found to be culpable for simple negligence, regardless of remorse. In this respect culpability is intricately related to the

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<sup>27</sup> "anarchic" here refers to responsibility prior to "auto-identification".

notion of responsibility as the starting point for moral agency. Further, in Levinas' grammar the trope of persecution of the "I" works well with culpability, as the "I" is persecuted/prosecuted from a "height" as responsible for the "other" "prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*" (Levinas 1974, 123). Thus, unlike in the case of emotional guilt, one is, following Levinas, culpable without respect for consciousness or conscientiousness.

More evidence for the case against reading "*coupable*" as "guilty" is found in Levinas statement that "The for-the-other characteristic of the subject can be interpreted neither as a guilt complex (which presupposes an *initial* freedom), nor as a natural benevolence or divine "instinct" , nor as some love or some tendency to sacrifice" (Levinas 1974, 124). It is clear that Lingis' use of "guilt" does not measure up to Levinas' use of "*coupable*". Culpability in the accusative tense is to blame. This is important as the notion of the subject as responsible, of the "one-for-the-other", and the notion of blame are related. One is "blameworthy" in the same sense that one is alive. The passage which Levinas' quotes from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* evinces this relationship.

"Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others".  
(Levinas 1974, 146).

This proclamation, which Dostoyevsky puts in the mouth of Markel, the dead brother of the Elder Zosima, is an expression of culpability and "blameworthiness". However, it is not stated dourly by Markel upon his death bed, but rather with great joy. The declaration does not evince a sense of guilt but rather of being responsible; ecstatically so. This is borne out by the passage which follows the proclamation.

At that mother even smiled, she wept and smiled: “How can it be,” she said, “that you are the most guilty before everyone? There are murderers and robbers, and how have you managed to sin so that you should accuse yourself most of all?” “Dear mother, heart of my heart,” he said (he had then begun saying such unexpected, endearing words), “heart of my heart, my joyful one, you must know that verily each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it pains me. And how could we have lived before, getting angry, and not knowing anything?” Thus he awoke every day with more and more tenderness, rejoicing and all atremble with love. (Dostoyevsky 1990, 289)

Here is a proclamation by a being facing their finitude responsibly. This is the character of the re-imagined “best account” which I apprehend as being made possible by the juxtaposition of Taylor’s and Levinas’ respective insights. An articulation, one’s finding oneself accountable, in the same sense that one finds oneself “thrown” into being. The Heideggerian connotations here are obvious. However, a direct comparison with the notion of “being-towards-death” is not immediately helpful for our examination.

My reading of culpability in Levinas and Dostoevsky is supported to some extent by the excellent analysis of the relationship of Levinas with the work of Dostoyevsky carried out by Alain Toumayan. In his essay “‘I more than the others’: Dostoevsky and Levinas”, Toumayan asserts that Levinas employs the Dostoyevsky quote to elicit “the notions of guilt, answerability, and responsibility within this formula while preserving its basic expression of asymmetry and nonreciprocity” (Toumayan 2004, 56). Toumayan goes on to state that Levinas’ varied use of the quotation is “authorized by Dostoyevsky’s text (Dostoyevsky uses most frequently *vinovatyi*, which means both guilty and responsible)” (ibid).

With the exception of replacing the term *coupable* with guilty, following the reasoning I have outlined above, Toumayan’s analysis is extremely helpful. Toumayan drives home the sense in which Dostoyevsky’s prose helps Levinas to articulate a sense

of accountability which exceeds our capacity to respond as finite beings. Yet, read within the context of the novel wherein Dostoyevsky originally framed the statement, one is not left despairing in the face of our inability to meet the infinite demands of accountability. Rather, one can take heart that in articulating our accountability, and in going forth, attempting to meet our overflowing sense of being responsible, we might work to bring not only a degree of justice into the world, but perhaps even “tenderness” and love (Dostoyevsky 1990, 289).

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor places a high priority on the need for agents to get clear about what moral and spiritual sources move them. Indeed, Taylor never hesitates when an opportunity arises to point out which goods he perceives as motivating his philosophical opponents (Taylor 1989b, 102). Levinas, on the other hand, forcefully argues against agents ever understanding the call of the other/ethics which is “otherwise than being”. In re-imagining the “best account principle” I would like to walk a middle path between clairvoyance and mystery. To claim to know the other is to make an object of them, regardless of the sincerity of one’s intentions. Commensurately, to acquiesce to the opacity of ethics, as conceived by Levinas, runs counter to the human desire to understand, and reflect upon, our “being in the world”. In the attempt to forge a path between the perspectives’ of Taylor and Levinas, I have found help from Dostoyevsky.

#### Embodied Accountability

In describing the changes which occurred in the character Markel upon his death bed, Dostoyevsky has the character explain to his mother that, with regard to his new found desire to become a servant to his servants, and to stand guilty “in everything before everyone”; “I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it pains

me” (Dostoyevsky 1990, 289). Markel is unable to offer an account of the precise sources of his sudden feeling of absolute responsibility for others. We might reach for terms like epiphany, or revelation, to categorize what has transpired. However, these words usually connote some great, sudden, understanding. Such an understanding is absent in this case. Nevertheless, the feeling is acute and Markel does endeavour to give expression to it. I contend that Markel’s expression is a “best account” of responsibility following my suggestions above. I argue that the best way to describe this account is as an expression of embodied accountability.

To support my argument I would like to return to Taylor’s reading of Merleau-Ponty in Taylor’s essay “Embodied Agency”. Taylor uses Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “*être au monde*”, or “being in the world”, to describe our intrinsic engagement with the world. Taylor uses this as a premise to state that a great deal of “our perceiving activity is involuntary” (Taylor 1989a, 10). It is my assertion that the “involuntary” character of our “perceiving activity” extends to our perceiving our accountability to others as a feature of our being embodied, present prior to “auto-identification”, and irrespective of our desire to choose to be responsible, or not.

Following Taylor’s statement that “We have to innovate in language, and bring the structures of our being in the world to clarity by formulations which open up a zone which is ordinarily outside our range of thought and attention” (Taylor 1989a, 19). I argue that we must endeavour to express our sense of embodied accountability, even if like Markel, we cannot elucidate its origins. Re-imagining Taylor’s “best account principle” as an expression of accountability rather than authenticity, consists of articulating our responsibility for others as the source of moral agency itself.

The quest by agents for a sense of authentic identity too often makes an enemy of difference. It drives us to covet a dignified sense of self-regard, and ignore our accountability to others. I agree wholeheartedly with Taylor regarding the need to “innovate in language” and “open up a zone which is ordinarily outside our range of thought and attention.” However, I contend that the “zone” which we need to open ourselves up to is that of our embodied accountability to others. The first step toward opening up this zone is through the articulation of our “best account” as accountable, of our “being in the world” *grâce à les autres et pour les autres*, thanks to others and for others. I am arguing that, *contra* Taylor, moral identity is founded through our responsibility to others, rather than our ability to live up to a self-interpreted, and self-empowering hypergood.

To anticipate a Taylorian critique, I am well aware that my argument might be written down to my being moved by the hypergood of accountability. Perhaps this is so. However, the crux of my argument does not revolve around a reflexive archeology of the self. The crux of my argument revolves around the re-imagined “best account”, which is the imperative to give expression to our being here for the other; prior to any reflection upon what this responsibility might intuit regarding our sense of self. As such, the consequence is not a more salient expression of our moral identities, but rather the expression of our embodied accountability to others as the source and condition for developing moral identity. It is the expression of our finding ourselves open to others, in the same way that we find ourselves open to sound, smell, and touch. To articulate a “best account” of accountability is to “innovate in language”, in an effort to bring our

embodied accountability to conscious attention, and to clarify the structure of our being in the world for others.



## Postscript

19. And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.  
(Wittgenstein 1958, 11e)

I chose to begin my dissertation with the above quote from Wittgenstein and I find myself once again relying upon it to move my discussion forward. Over the course of the preceding chapters I have attempted to imagine a language for describing accountability as embodied. In this endeavour I have borrowed mightily from a variety of thinkers, none more so than Emmanuel Levinas and Charles Taylor. In deciding how to bring my dissertation to an end, I once again turned to Levinas for inspiration. I have struggled to maintain a critical awareness of the drive for systemacy and totality which lurks within every philosophical work, including my own. While I am certain that I have indulged this drive at points throughout my dissertation, I would like to take one last stab at renouncing any claim to a comprehensive outlook.

I chose the title postscript for this the last section of my dissertation, rather than “conclusion”, as I wanted to circumvent a sense of closure, or of tying things up. It is my somewhat presumptuous hope, that my work opens a door to discussion and further imagining. I am aware that my desire to resist systemacy is complicated by the universal character of my argument regarding embodied accountability. It is true that I believe that our accountability to others is an embodied feature of our “being in the world”.

I have largely used philosophical language to frame my discussion of accountability. However, to express the core element of what I envisioned as a re-imagined “best account” of accountability, I relied upon the language of literature. Likewise, I believe that the notion of embodied accountability may be articulated through myriad different forms of language, i.e. poetry, painting, dance, etc. Going forward, I

would like to focus more attention upon aspects such as gender and health in relation to the articulation of embodied accountability.

In reflecting upon Wittgenstein's statement regarding imagining a language, I find reason to believe that there are potent tropes and metaphors to be found amongst the variety of languages in which we live our lives, which might be used for developing better accounts of embodied accountability. As a philosopher concerned with moral discourse, it is my intent to work upon finding and developing more helpful descriptive vocabularies in which agents can think about, and articulate accounts of, embodied accountability.

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