**Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____         _____
        Lucas A. Scripter                                        Date

**Moral Articulacy:**
**An Essay on Charles Taylor's Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy**


By
Lucas A. Scripter
Doctor of Philosophy

Philosophy



---

Dr. Nick Fotion
Advisor



---

Dr. Pamela Hall
Committee Member



---

Dr. Cynthia Willett
Committee Member



Accepted:



---

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies



---

Date

**Moral Articulacy:**
**An Essay on Charles Taylor's Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy**

By

Lucas A. Scripter
B.A., Bethel College, 2004
M.A., Emory University, 2009

Advisor: Dr. Nick Fotion, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
Philosophy
2013

**Abstract**

**Moral Articulacy:**
**An Essay on Charles Taylor's Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy**

By Lucas A. Scripter

Among the critics of modern moral philosophy, Charles Taylor stands out for couching his critique in terms of the "inarticulacy" of contemporary theory. Despite its pervasive role in his writing, Taylor's leaves the notion of 'inarticulacy' and its root concept 'articulation' woefully under-articulated. In this thesis I explore these notions and argue that his characterization of contemporary theory in terms of "inarticulacy" is hardly incidental to his critique. Rather the concept of moral 'inarticulacy' provides a clue to reading the whole of his moral philosophy. Thus, I offer a critical interpretation of Taylor's moral philosophy centered on his notion of moral articulacy. This thesis explores the meaning of moral 'inarticulacy,' the conditions for moral articulacy, and whether or not contemporary moral theory is actually as inarticulate as Taylor assumes. Articulating the concept of 'articulation' reveals how his critiques of naturalism and epistemology, his "expressivist" view of language, his "engaged" conception of human agency, and his dialogical conception of practical reason come to bear on his moral philosophy. It thus gives us a way of weaving together broader themes in his work and seeing how his widespread philosophical pursuits come to bear on his critique of contemporary theory. Moreover, the notion of moral articulacy illuminates how Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy fits into in the context of his moral philosophy as a whole. It points toward a two stage reading of his moral philosophy that synthesizes his advocacy of ethical pluralism with his own defense of an *agape*-centered ethic by showing the former moment as clearing a space for substantive moral dialogue by eliminating overly restrictive meta-ethical assumptions and the later moment as itself the articulation of a particular ethical vision within that freshly achieved space of moral articulacy.

**Moral Articulacy:**
**An Essay on Charles Taylor's Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy**


By


Lucas A. Scripter
B.A., Bethel College, 2004
M.A., Emory University, 2009


Advisor: Dr. Nick Fotion, Ph.D.


A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
Philosophy
2013

## Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to my Advisor Nick Fotion for the wisdom, patience, and grace with which he supervised this dissertation as well as his intellectual mentorship during my graduate studies. Special thanks also goes to Pamela Hall and Cynthia Willett, who provided excellent guidance and encouragement throughout the dissertation writing process. Conversations with them reminded me of the value and joy in studying philosophy. I'm also grateful to Michael Sullivan and John Lysaker for serving as readers of this dissertation; I greatly appreciate their challenging questions and helpful feedback at the defense. A note of thanks is also due to Hilge Landweer and Jan Slaby of the Free University of Berlin who welcomed me into their seminars during the 2010-2011 academic year. These seminars contributed significantly to my understanding of the philosophy of emotions.

Many friends provided helpful advice and encouragement along the way. In particular, I'd like to thank Chris Kluz, Jong Hwan Lee, Lauren Caryer, Michal Gleitman, Daniel Farmer, Sara Shady, and Andy Gustafson. Special thanks goes to David McPherson with whom I've shared thought-provoking and inspiring conversations on Taylor's work, often very late at night or in the early hours of the morning. These conversations kept in my view aspects of Taylor's philosophy that otherwise would have receded to the background.

Finally I'd like to thank my mother, Beverly Scripter, and my wife, Lydia Lu. In moments of intellectual triumph as well as defeat, they were there with constancy and encouragement. Without their support this dissertation would not have been completed.

# Table of Contents

## Introduction

"There is a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a
move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts."
~ Iris Murdoch[1]

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a surge in wholesale critiques of modern

moral philosophy. The alleged stagnancy of mainstream projects, their limiting assumptions, and

utter loss of connection with everyday life disconcerted many of the discipline's participants and

spectators. At issue is the shape and status of ethical reflection. How should we think about the

moral life? What is morality? How does moral thinking fit into the whole of life? How do our duties

and obligations to others relate to the pursuit of good, meaningful lives? What models are adequate

for thinking about the moral life?  Can we have a 'theory' of morality? And if so, what would such a

'theory' look like? These questions typify the on-going self-critical discussion within contemporary

moral philosophy about its own endeavors and aspirations.

Among the chorus of critical voices in recent moral philosophy, Charles Taylor stands out

for the depth of his conception of moral agency as well as the breadth of his historical perspective

elaborated at length in two massive accounts of modernity.[2] Unfortunately, despite the relevance of

his vision of ethical life to the aforementioned questions, Taylor's position has been mostly neglected

in mainstream Anglo-American discussions of these and related topics.[3] This dissertation attempts to

fill in, at least partially, this lacuna in philosophical engagement. This project springs from the

intuition that putting Taylor into dialogue with contemporary debates about the shape, authority, and

proper place of moral theory will lead to fruitful results. But in order to do this, we need to first place

---

[1] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971), 1.

[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007).

[3] In theory/anti-theory discussions, Taylor is sometimes mentioned, but his positions are considered in only a cursory manner. One exception to this trend is Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 155-82. Taylor's work, by contrast, has received more attention in recent German discussions of ethics, especially those thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School. See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics,* trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 69-76; Rainer Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism,* trans. John M.M. Farrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 220-229.

Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy in the context of his own rich work. While his writings on ethics may not be the most technical pieces of philosophical analysis, they draw support from a broad philosophical view of human life that addresses a wide range of topics running from human agency and language to epistemology and religion. Our critical analysis of Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy thus involves a double contextualization by (a) viewing Taylor's moral philosophy through the prism of his broader philosophy and (b) placing this position in relation to other, primarily analytical approaches to similar questions.

Critical writers in contemporary moral philosophy are sometimes divided into two camps: the "theory critics" and the "morality critics."[4] These writers respectively take issue with (a) the *form* of moral theory and (b) the *place* of morality within practical deliberation. Critiques of the first variety target conceptions of moral thinking based on models drawn from natural science, bureaucracy, or law.[5] So understood, 'theory' subscribes, even if only implicitly, to the "Kantian dogma that behind every moral intuition lies a universal rule, behind every set of rules a single stateable principle or systems of principles."[6] The issue is whether moral reflection should be understood as, to borrow Stuart Hampshire's words, "a set of propositions, comparatively general ones, which explain a much larger, sometimes heterogeneous range of accepted propositions that seem to be more unrelated to each other than they really are."[7] Above all, anti-theorists worry about the attempt to reduce moral

---

[4] See Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," *Ethics* 107 (January 1997): 252-262. Also see Robert Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

[5] See, for instance, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985); Annette Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices," and "Doing without Moral Theory?" in *Postures of Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) chapters 11 and 12; Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983); Cheryl Noble, "Normative Ethical Theories," *The Monist* 62 (October 1979), 496-509; Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind,* n.s., 80 (October 1971): 552-571.

[6] Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices," 208.

[7] Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, 17. Other anti-theorists mean something similar by 'theory.' Williams writes, "An ethical theory is a theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which account either implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles or else implies that there cannot be such a test." *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 72. Similarly Baier writes, "By normative theory I mean a system of moral principles in which the less general are derived from the more general." "Doing without Moral Theory," 232.

thinking to a single principle, algorithm, or "decision procedure," a term which as Robert Louden has noted, counts among "the favorite terms of abuse among antitheorists."[8]

Anti-theorists tell a variety of stories to discredit the conception of moral theory in the above sense. These critiques typically allege that the picture of morality advanced by moral theories radically misrepresents and is ill suited to the actual character of ethical life. Cheryl Noble, for instance, finds the moral theorist's quest to uncover an underlying unity in moral judgments to be incredible in light of the plurality of socially and historically contingent practices in which moral judgments find their proper place and origin.[9] Reflecting on the way in which morality is learned through moral instruction, Annette Baier doubts that we ought to be able to express our morality in terms of explicit judgments, let alone form a system of them.[10] Similarly, Stuart Hampshire maintains that the moral theorist's desire for discovering an underlying unity to human morality is bound for failure given the conflicting plurality of values and ways of life that flow from our nature as imaginative, cultural animals.[11] These various strategies exhibit a common structure that pits moral theory, understood as the pursuit of a system of general moral principles, against a conception of ethical life that resists such a formulation.[12] These accounts of our ethical life tend to underscore the plurality of ethical values, the historical/cultural contingency of our practices, and the inability to explicitly formulate our moralities in terms of explicit principles. As a consequence, critics maintain

---

[8] Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*, 92; see also Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," 253-255. For a sophisticated discussion of the very notion of a decision procedure, see Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 42-51.

[9] Noble, "Normative Ethical Theories," 497-500.

[10] She writes, "A significant fact about moral conscience is that its deliverances need not come in verbal form, that it is often a difficult task to articulate what it is we are certain is wrong in an action, let alone what universal rule we think it breaks. In moral philosophy courses we insist that students make their moral intuitions articulate, that they represent them and 'defend' them by subsuming them under some universal rule that coheres in some system, and we make them feel that they must have been muddled if their moral intuitions are inarticulate or resist tidy codifications. But it may be we the intellectualizers who are muddled, not those whose consciences we insist on tidying up." Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices," 213-214. See also Annette Baier, "Extending the Limits of Moral Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (October 1986): 538-545.

[11] Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983).

[12] A similar strategy is adopted by ethical naturalists like Mark Johnson and Owen Flanagan, who think that contemporary moral theories are ill-fitted to what we empirically know about how human beings are. See Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), chapter 1 and chapter 2.

that moral theory comes off as implausibly reductionist in light of the rich yet messy character of ethical life.[13]

Critiques of the second variety take issue with the way in which morality fits into the whole of deliberative life. Thinkers such as Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt urge us to start from the most basic question of practical deliberation—namely, the question of how to live.[14] Starting here does not exclude moral considerations, but it does not bias them by casting the discussion in explicitly moral terms as does the question 'what is the morally right thing to do?'[15] Looking at moral philosophy from the standpoint of this broader, deliberative question brings to the fore the issue of morality's authority. As Frankfurt observes, "even after we have accurately identified the commands of the moral law, there still remains—for most of us—the more fundamental practical question of just how important it is to obey them."[16] Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf warn us that giving morality deliberative primacy could come at the cost of a meaningful life.[17] Wolf suggests, "When people face a conflict between meaning and morality, we have reason to be sympathetic, and

---

[13] These features of anti-theory positions are all commonly pointed to in the secondary literature surrounding the theory-anti-theory debate. See Stanley G. Clarke, "Anti-Theory in Ethics" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (July 1987): 237-244; Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, "Introduction: The Primacy of Moral Practice," in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservativism*, ed.Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1-25; Tom Sorrell, *Moral Theory and Anomaly* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), chapter 1; Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*, Introduction and chapter 5; Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," 252-262; Martha Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 227-255.

[14] Indeed, as Williams stresses, the appropriate starting point is not even the question "how should one live?"—a question Williams finds too general, too apt to slide into moral theory—but rather the more personally indexed question "how should I live?" See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, especially chapter 1; Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), chapter 1.

[15] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 4-5.

[16] Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, 9.

[17] See Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism For and Against* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1973), 77-155; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," and "Moral luck," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981) chapters 1 and 2; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (August 1982): 419-439; Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 299-315; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-225; Susan Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 203-223; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010). Susan Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," in *Luck, Value, & Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams,* eds. Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71-92. The theme of meaning is most explicit in Wolf's writings, but she persuasively recasts Williams's arguments in terms of meaning versus morality.

sometimes even to be grateful if they decide not to do what morality requires."[18] What emerges is thus the broader question of how we live meaningful *and* moral lives. What's the relationship between meaning and morality? How do we live lives that do justice to the claims of both on an agent? Why should morality assume any special place in our deliberative lives?

To these two branches of criticism—namely, the critique of moral theory and the critique of morality—we need to add a third: the critique of *modern* moral theory. The most well known argument in this category is perhaps Elizabeth Anscombe's blistering diatribe against "modern moral philosophy."[19] She took issue with the moral sense of 'ought' by suggesting that it is the conceptual remains of a long since abandoned natural law ethic. Given the spurious character of the moral 'ought,' we'd be better off, she thought, sticking to more descriptively anchored concepts as we find in virtue and vice talk.[20] The key point is that the problems of moral philosophy are *distinctively modern*—they stem from holding on to a concept that lacks the appropriate conceptual background. Alasdair MacIntyre famously advanced a similar line of argument in his *After Virtue*, which opens with the provocative image of a post-apocalyptic landscape analogous, he thinks, to our contemporary conceptual situation in ethics.[21] Again, the problem is a distinctively *modern* one. What MacIntyre calls "the Enlightenment project" was doomed from the outset, on his story, because it abandoned teleological assumptions necessary to link our moral judgments to human nature. Absent this Aristotelian conceptual background, moral thinking loses its bearings and lapses into subjectivism. The problem with our contemporary moral thinking isn't so much about theory or morality as such but rather the peculiarly *modern* versions prevailing today.[22]

---

[18] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 60.

[19] G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (January 1958): 1-19.

[20] Cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, "On Brute Facts," *Analysis* 18 (January 1958): 69-72.

[21] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Ethical Theory,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See also Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Privatization of Good: An Inaugural Lecture," *Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 344-361.

[22] Cf. Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98 (January 1988): 256-257. Both thinkers maintain, in her words, "that certain concepts require for their content or intelligibility background conditions which are no longer fulfilled. So, according to both of them, we go on using the old words, but the words can no longer carry their old significance" (257). The Anscombe-MacIntyre line of "virtue ethics" has been recently called "radical virtue ethics" by Talbot Brewer because of the way it poses a fundamental challenge to modern projects rather than a mere parallel option for dealing with the same problems. While Brewer doesn't mention

Despite targeting apparently separate assumptions, these various criticisms participate in the same overarching discussion about how we understand morality within the overall context of human life. As Brian Leiter has pointed out, the criticisms of the authority of morality don't primarily target everyday, common sense morality but rather the morality of moral theory.[23] We might add the further observation that moral 'theory' here picks out a distinctively *modern* conception of theory.[24] The different varieties of criticism, of course, have substantially different ways of framing the problem, but these different frames are part of the same conversation. The key point is that these problems are mutually interlocking, deeply interconnected pieces of a common puzzle. How you conceive of the nature of moral theory and the content of morality will impact the authority you grant it.[25] At the extreme, agreeing on the priority of morality without agreeing on its content, as Owen Flanagan has pointed out, renders the whole discussion of morality's authority pointless. The category of 'morality' lacks the stable content necessary to meaningfully be given primacy.[26] In short, these three strands of debate are woven together. Each of the three lines of criticism picks out a dimension of a common problematic.

---

Taylor, I think we can clearly place him in this tradition of virtue ethical thinking. See Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 1-7. For a scathing critique of recent, non-radical, post-MacIntyrean work in virtue ethics see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 62-67.

[23] Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," 252-257. For this reason Leiter thinks that both "morality critics" and "theory critics" are at the end of the day both critics of moral theory, albeit from different angles.

[24] Indeed, one escape route is to deny 'theory' need assume the problematical modern forms it often takes. Robert Louden adopts such a strategy. See Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*.

[25] This internal link between the content and authority of theory is revealed in Samuel Scheffler's writing on the subject, one of the most sophisticated interventions in this debate, to my mind. Scheffler breaks down our options in the face of demanding moral theories into four options: (1) reject the theory because its morality is too demanding, (2) accept the demanding theory but limit the scope of its applicability, (3) accept a demanding moral theory but permit agents to sometimes rationally take the non-moral course of action, and (4) accept a demanding moral theory and also accept that the moral life just is that hard! The key point is that we can see how content and authority connect in a way as to shape the problem space in which we work. See Scheffler, *Human Morality*, chapter 2. A similar idea lies behind a comment made by Brian Leiter that the two sub-debates boil down to "a matter of emphasis." He expounds, "the Theory Critic invokes the plurality of values to emphasize the inadequacy of a theoretical framework which excludes so much, while the Morality Critic invokes the plurality of values in order to emphasize the costs of morality's OT [Overriding Thesis] and argue against it." Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," 261n26. These interconnections are further discussed in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

[26] Owen Flanagan, "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (January 1986): 58.

Having sketched the general philosophical landscape surrounding the shape and status of moral theory, I want to now turn to Taylor's position. His critique of modern moral philosophy bears directly on the interlocking problems described above. He shares with his fellow critics the suspicion that contemporary moral theory operates under the influence of natural science and, consequently, forces moral reflection into a mold ill fitted to ethical life.[27] These misleading paradigms entice us into a familiar picture of moral theory. On this view, "The central task of moral philosophy is to account for what generates the obligations that hold for us. A satisfactory moral theory is generally thought to be one that defines some criterion or procedure which will allow us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do."[28] Moral theorists, as he reads the contemporary scene, "agree that there must be a single principle from which one can generate all and only obligatory actions, but they wage a vigorous polemic over the nature of this principle."[29] Contemporary theory subscribes to what he calls "code fetishism."[30] Here we see shared ground with the so-called "theory critics." The underlying issue to which Taylor and other anti-theorists draw our attention is whether morality ought properly to be thought of as the kind of thing we could define by finding the right criterion.

Taylor's position also touches on issues central to the debate over the deliberative authority of 'morality.' This style of contemporary criticism takes issue with conceptions of 'morality' that are narrowly defined and yet still claim unrelenting priority in the face of conflicts with other goods. The worry as it plays out in Wolf and Williams is that a one-dimensional view of morality crushes our "projects," relationships, and other sources of meaning in our lives.[31] Taylor makes a similar claim about 'morality' as it is understood by a dominant strand of contemporary moral theory. For such theorists, he tells us, "'Moral' defines a certain kind of reasoning, which in an unexplained way has in

---

[27] See Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 2* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 230-231.

[28] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 70.

[29] Charles Taylor, "Perils of Moralism," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 347.

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 707.

[31] Brian Leiter has aptly analyzed these strategies as consisting of two major claims: (1) the idea that morality somehow trades off with other important goods and (2) the idea that morality necessarily take precedence over competing considerations in practical deliberation. See "Leiter, "Nietsche and the Morality Critics," 258-260.

principle priority. It is not clear how moral considerations can function with others in a single deliberative activity; we cannot see why these higher considerations should usually be given priority and also why they might be denied this in certain circumstances."[32] It is due to moral theory's one-dimensional view of moral reasoning that we run into problems finding conceptual space for the recognition of other genuine goods that may legitimately prevail against a one-dimensional view of moral reasoning.

Taylor traces this dubious conception of moral theory and its 'morality' back to a limited agenda: "Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy has tended to see morality as concerned with questions of what we ought to do and to occlude or exclude questions about what it is good to be or what it is good to love."[33] This tendency towards a "narrow" range of questions and concerns produces, in Taylor's sights, "a cramped and truncated view of morality" isolated from a broader set of ethical concerns.[34] The point here, as I read him, is that we cannot compartmentalize morality and the good life, a premise assumed by the view of moral theory as a system of principles for dealing with moral *obligations*.[35] It is only on the premise that we can think about moral obligation in isolation from the good life that we could begin to think about morality in terms of a system of obligations with potentially a singular ultimate criterion for adjudicating moral disputes. From here we are only a short step away from investing one principle with the power to override all other competing concerns, the kind of idea lurking behind the worries expressed by Williams and Wolf.[36] Here we see Taylor's link to the third variety of moral philosophical self-criticism popular today. Taylor's suspicion of the modern tendency to compartmentalize the right and the good shares an essential concern with

---

[32] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 88; cf. Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 170-183.
[33] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" in *Dilemmas and Connections*, 3.
[34] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.
[35] This point comes out clearly in Charles Taylor, "Comments and Replies," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 244-245.
[36] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87-90.

Anscombe and MacIntyre—namely, that modern moral philosophy ignores the good at its own

intellectual peril. Like these thinkers he is interested in the recovery of the language of virtue.[37]

The unique character of Taylor's position is most clearly manifested, I want to argue, in his

characterization of our situation in terms of the notion of 'inarticulacy.' He writes, for instance, "My

main grievance against the morality system concerns the dead weight of *enforced inarticulacy* that it lays

on modern culture."[38] The concepts of moral articulacy and inarticulacy play an essential role in

Taylor's characterization of our current state. But what does it mean to be morally articulate or

inarticulate? And what is it about contemporary moral theory that supposedly makes us *inarticulate* in

the moral life? While concepts of (in)articulacy and articulation plays an important and pervasive role

in Taylor's writing, including the formulation of his critique of contemporary moral philosophy, it

remains woefully underdeveloped and "belongs to the most dark and difficult understand points" in

Taylor's thought.[39] Even in the secondary literature it remains largely overlooked or

underappreciated.[40]

This dissertation raises four lines of questioning. First, is Taylor's use of the notion of moral

"inarticulacy" merely incidental or does it provide a deeper clue to his moral philosophy? Second,

what do we mean when we talk about 'articulacy' or 'inarticulacy' in the moral life? Otherwise put,

what is 'articulation' and how does this impact the moral life? Third, what sense can be made of

---

[37] Also like these thinkers he is interested primarily in meta-ethical issues rather than analysis of habits of character. See Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4-6.

[38] Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 153, italics mine. This passage is partially quoted in Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 43. See also Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3, which is entitled "Ethics of Inarticulacy" and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), chapter 2, which is entitled "The Inarticulate Debate." William E. Connolly has used the expression "moral articulation" in reference to Taylor but he neither develops a specialized sense for the term nor uses it as a piece of technical terminology as I have in this project. See his "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation" in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 168.

[39] Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998), 149, translation mine. "Nun gehört Taylors Artikulationsverständnis jedoch zu den dunkelsten und am schwersten verständlichen Punkten seiner Konzeption…"

[40] Two commentators that do devote substantial time to articulating the notion are Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 41-46 and Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor,* 145-163. See also Joel Anderson, "The Personal Lives of Strong Evaluators: Identity, Pluralism, and Ontology in Charles Taylor's Value Theory," *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 30-32; Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), chapter 8.

Taylor's claim that 'the good' is an essential condition for moral articulacy? And finally, does contemporary moral theory have as little a place for 'the good' as Taylor portrays it or is this portrayal, as some theory defenders have suggested, a mere strawperson?

On an interpretive level, this dissertation argues that the concept of *moral (in)articulacy* provides a clue to interpreting Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy and functions as a useful prism for reading his take on the moral life as a whole. It enables us to weave together several different strands of Taylor's work, specifically his account of human agency, his expressivist view of language, his critique of modern moral philosophy, his ardent defense of pluralism, and his own theistic inclinations. The notion of moral 'articulacy' provides a framework for unifying and organizing Taylor's thought, especially his work on ethics. Above all, it illuminates and brings to the fore the way his critique of contemporary theory draws on the resources of his hermeneutical conception of moral agency, a feature that sets him apart from his fellow anti-theorists.[41]

On a substantive level, this project is put forward as a critical extension of Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy, albeit with certain caveats, qualifications, and modifications. The concept of moral articulacy highlights what I take to be the most trenchant line of Taylor's argument against contemporary theory. It is thus not only a convenient notion for interpreting Taylor, but also one that illuminates the deeply interpretive character of the moral life and specifically the failings of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, which tends to neglect, ignore, or downplay the hermeneutical dimension of the moral life.

Despite overall sympathies towards his position, in stressing certain aspects of Taylor's work my reading drifts from his own presentation of his ideas in subtle and not so subtle ways. Let me note in advance three areas where my interpretation differs from Taylor's writings. First, it is more sympathetic towards naturalism, at least in its non-reductive forms. I reject the tight link Taylor

---

[41] For an insightful discussion of how Taylor's version of hermeneutics relates to other variants of Hermeneutics, notably that of Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty see Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997); cf. Rainer Forst's remark, "This hermeneutic conception of the ethical person is the central premise of Taylor's methodological critique of naturalist objectictivism in the human sciences, of his critique of deontological (and utilitarian) conceptions of morality, and, finally, of his critique of modernity itself." Forst, *Contexts of Justification*, 216.

attempts to make between naturalism and what he calls "procedural" moral theories and suggest that non-reductive naturalistic ethics could be morally articulate in principle.[42] This is bound up with a second difference from Taylor's position. I make a clearer a distinction between two phases of Taylor's argument than perhaps he would be willing to recognize. In my view, his argument begins with a *critique of modern moral philosophy* and then proceeds to advance *positive vision for ethics*. The former establishes a space for moral articulation and the latter counts as a particular articulation within that space. The explicitly religious moments in Taylor's writings on ethics fit within the second stage, i.e., as a particular articulation within a space that recognizes the need to articulate the good. I urge this distinction as a way of combining Taylor's defense of ethical pluralism with his own religious convictions and inspiration. Finally, I side with some of Taylor's critics in holding that modern moral theories are not as reductionistic as he assumes. Rather than seeing contemporary theories as mere 'decision procedures,' they are more accurately seen as 'deliberative frameworks' that structure moral deliberation and perception without requiring it be squeezed into an algorithm for moral decision-making. Nevertheless, I maintain that Taylor's critique still applies to contemporary theories and provides reasons to reject even the more nuanced versions we actually encounter when we take a look at contemporary theories.

This dissertation will proceed as follows. In chapter one I make the case for seeing the notion of 'inarticulacy' as a prism through which to view Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy. The most foundational mistake of contemporary theory is its "narrow" interest in obligatory action to the exclusion of the deep and pervasive role the good plays in our moral thinking. In its most basic sense Taylor's charge of "inarticulacy" picks up on the neglect of the good. In characterizing modern moral philosophy as 'inarticulate,' Taylor isn't just saying that it doesn't talk enough about the good. This claim comes out when we consider the counter-charge that moral thinking can successfully employ a "division of labor" between reflections on moral obligation

---

[42] For a different treatment of Taylor sympathetic to some versions of naturalism see Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 136-161.

and the good life, a position advocated by Will Kymlicka and Jürgen Habermas.[43] Rather, Taylor's

claim is that contemporary moral theories cannot bracket questions of the good because they

embody, whether they recognize it or not, a view of the good and must be set in dialogue with other

goods. Inarticulacy is thus revealed to be a special kind of incoherence.[44] This dissertation examines

whether and in what sense moral obligations need to be re-embedded in understandings of the good

in order to be coherent or, more specifically, morally articulate. Moral articulacy requires recognizing

the ancient shape of modern moral philosophy, i.e., the way in which distinctively modern values are

best understood in terms of structures more clearly exhibited by ancient writers.

I conclude the chapter by suggesting a two-phase approach to reading Taylor's work in

moral philosophy. In phase one, Taylor argues that any moral philosophy requires a view of the good

in order to be articulate. This is grounded on his conception of moral articulacy. In phase two, Taylor

articulates a particular conception of the good. Keeping these two phases distinct enables us to

reconcile various elements of Taylor's work—namely, his critique of modern moral philosophy, the

premium he places on dialogue, his commitment to pluralism, and his own religious convictions.

Chapters two and three examine the meaning of moral 'articulacy' against different

conceptual backdrops within Taylor's writing. Chapter two looks at how the notion of 'articulacy'

springs from his critique of a reductive version of naturalism, which seeks to eliminate any trace of

'anthropocentric' properties from the real. But Taylor's critique of naturalism, as some critics have

rightly pointed out, has a very narrow scope that overlooks moderate versions of naturalism. Taylor's

narrative concerning the rise of procedural moral theory connects it with naturalism, but I show by

pointing at the work of several prominent naturalistic theorists, that there is hardly an alliance

between procedural moral theory and naturalism. Indeed, on my reading, there is no necessary

---

[43] See Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 170 and Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 3-4.

[44] Taylor takes this claim to separate him sharply from MacIntyre who thinks that "the Enlightenment project" simply levels down moral life. Characterizing contemporary moral philosophy as 'inarticulate,' by contrast, is charging it with a special kind of incoherence that recognizes moral life to be richer than moral theories can account for. See "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 16-43, especially pp. 22-23.

incompatibility between ethical naturalism and moral articulacy, so long as naturalism is understood in its moderate rather than reductionistic mode. Nevertheless, Taylor's meta-ethic of moral articulacy clears a broad space for moral dialogue that is open to non-naturalistic, religious ethical outlooks, but this space in itself doesn't exclude naturalistic ethics.

Chapter three examines Taylor's notion of 'articulacy' vis-à-vis his critique of what he calls "the epistemological picture" and his defense of "engaged agency." These notions throw into relief the indispensable role that an inarticulate background plays in making possible the intelligibility of our explicit beliefs and judgments. What emerges from this discussion is an awareness of the indispensably and perpetually inarticulate "background" understanding against which we lead our lives. I call this *structural inarticulacy*, a kind of inarticulacy that is fundamentally different than the inarticulacy targeted by Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy. This general structure of human understanding carries over to the moral life and gives Taylor a way of articulating a contemporary account of *phronesis*. The moral life, in other words, is necessarily dependent on a forever-inarticulate understanding of the good that Taylor likens to tact. But it is also something we can articulate. How do we articulate the moral life? Our answer to this question leads us through Taylor's philosophy of language. What emerges is a very expansive notion of the means available for human self-expression. Framed in these terms, we come to the further question: what is the best mode of articulating the moral life? This framing contributes to the further erosion of the dominant paradigm of moral theory because there is a wide range of non-theoretical media for the articulation/expression of the moral life. Here we see clear implications of our investigation into the notion of inarticulacy for Taylor's discussion of modern moral theory, which can neither lay claim to (a) self-sufficiency as it is dependent on an inarticulable background awareness nor (b) exclusivity as there are a wide range of media by which we can articulate the moral life.

Having offered an interpretation and analysis of 'moral articulacy,' I return to a more direct examination of Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy. Here the guiding questions are: (a) why does Taylor think modern moral philosophy is morally inarticulate, i.e., what is supposedly the

problem, and (b) is contemporary theory as inarticulate as he claims? As I read Taylor's argument, it rests on two premises: (1) that there is an internal connection between moral articulacy and the good and (2) that modern moral philosophy has no place for the good. The result is that modern moral philosophy can be characterized as morally "inarticulate."

In chapters four and five I offer a critical interpretation and defense of Taylor's claim that there is some sort of connection between moral articulacy and the good. As I read him, his critique rests on establishing a strong ethical holism, i.e., the idea that the right must be seen through the prism of the good in order to make sense. If he can succeed in showing that moral thinking breaks down or becomes distorted in isolating morality from a broader understanding of the good, then he has shown that modern moral philosophy is at risk of being morally inarticulate (this, of course, does not yet establish that modern moral theories have in fact committed this mistake; that will be discussed in chapter six).

Taylor traces the origins of moral theories that aspire to produce moral algorithms to an underlying conception of practical reason, which he calls "procedural" as opposed to "substantive." In other words, the view that we can separate morality from the good life springs, Taylor claims, from the eclipse of substantive by procedural modes of moral thinking. I thus begin by spelling out in greater detail what Taylor means by "procedural" and "substantive" views of practical reason. The distinction turns on the idea that a moral "order" serves as the fundamental touchstone for good practical reasoning. But where does this order come from? And how can we speak of moral "orders" in a deeply pluralistic world? The answer is Taylor's notion that we need go no further than our best collective moral interpretations to find a view of the good. These are fragmented, contested, and diverse, but it is from here that moral reasoning must proceed. I conclude by offering a reading of Taylor's critique as the claim that the full significance of morality cannot be appreciated when severed from the good. Call this *the holism of significance*. The ultimate upshot is to cast doubt on the compartmentalizability of the moral life, i.e., the idea that moral theory can neatly section off a piece

of the moral life while distancing itself from questions not only of the good life but also love of the good.

Chapter five addresses what I call the *weak reading* of Taylor's thesis of ethical holism. Here the focus is on how the moral 'right' must be seen in light of the good, i.e., situated within a broader deliberative perspective that weighs a wide range of heterogeneous goods. Taylor shares the worry with thinkers like Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf that modern moral theories present morality in such a way that it comes at the cost of those things that make life worthwhile, meaningful. I suggest that the writings of Wolf and Williams give us reason to be unsettled by the facile "division of labor" advanced by Kymlicka and Habermas. It shows that there is a real threat to isolating the right from the good because we may have reason from an "all things considered" perspective to subordinate the right to the good. Nevertheless, Williams and Wolf seem to present (for different reasons) a threat to morality's importance. Taylor's position, I argue, presents us with a successful path for navigating between those theories that isolate the right from the good and those critiques that seem to threaten the importance accorded to morality. The picture emerging from Taylor is that of practical deliberation conducted in light of an overarching conception of the good that recognizes the range of goods that matter to human well-being but also sees the moral right as itself an important good.  Call this *the holism of deliberation*. Moral articulacy requires nothing less.

Having defended Taylor's thesis of ethical holism in both of its forms, I turn to the question of whether contemporary moral theories are as Taylor describes them, i.e., whether they do in fact have no appreciable place for the good. This draws us into a fierce debate between theory-defenders and theory-attackers over how to characterize moral 'theory.' Following arguments advanced by Martha Nussbaum and Samuel Scheffler, I suggest that modern moral theory is far more complicated than anti-theorists, Taylor included, assume. We cannot think of moral theories as roughly identical to decision procedures but rather should conceive of them as evaluative frameworks Nevertheless, I try to show the persisting relevance of Taylor's critique by looking closely at two representatives of modern moral philosophy—namely, R.M. Hare's utilitarianism and Barbara Herman's Neo-

Kantianism. While these theories incorporate notions of the good within their overarching theoretical frameworks, they do so in ways that still render them vulnerable to Taylor's critique. This suggests the persisting relevance of Taylor's position, even after we have arrived at a more nuanced, less reductionistic picture of modern moral theory.

**Chapter 1: Diagnosing Moral Inarticulacy**

In the chorus of the critical voices of modern moral philosophy Charles Taylor stands out

for, among other things, couching his argument in terms of the concept of moral "inarticulacy." He

attributes to modern moral philosophy an "in-built tendency to *self-imposed inarticulacy*."[45] As he puts it

elsewhere, "My main grievance against the morality system concerns the dead weight of *enforced*

*inarticulacy* that it lays on modern culture."[46] Or yet again, "these strange cramped theories of modern

moral philosophy…have the paradoxical effect of *making us inarticulate* on some of the most

important issues of morality."[47] Despite its ubiquity in his writings, the notion of moral 'articulacy'

and 'articulation' remain confined to the background of Taylor's work.[48]  Nevertheless, I want to

argue that his decision to characterize the baleful effects of contemporary theory as a matter of

*inarticulacy* is not incidental, but rather it is a clue to understanding his position. Indeed, as I hope to

show the notion of moral 'articulacy' and its opposite, moral 'inarticulacy' play a crucial role in

structuring Taylor's moral philosophy at several levels. The concept enables us to trace threads

throughout Taylor's philosophy and thereby bring into view how his moral philosophy is buttressed

---

[45] Charles Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 42, italics mine. Also see Charles  Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), chapter 3, which is entitled "Ethics of Inarticulacy" and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), chapter 2, which is entitled "The Inarticulate Debate."

[46] Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 153, italics mine. This is partially quoted in Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 43.

[47] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89, italics mine.

[48] The secondary literature on Taylor also pays relatively little attention to developing notions of 'articulation' and moral 'articulacy.' There are two notable exceptions: Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 41-46; Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998), 145-163. Abbey briefly details six roles that the concept of 'articulation' plays in Taylor's thought, including its role in his critique of modern moral philosophy: (1) increases self-knowledge, (2) raises awareness of the plurality of values, (3) facilitates reasoned debate on topics of value, (4) lays the basis for criticizing moral theory, (5) empowers us to live morally, and (6) is a mode of immanent critique. While Abbey touches on some of the same features of 'articulation' as I do, including its use in Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy, her account remains limited in two notable ways. First, her brief examination remains leaves untouched several of the dimensions stressed in this thesis, e.g., its connection to Taylor's critique of epistemology and his conception of the "background." Second, Abbey's account touches on several uses of 'articulation' but leaves the interaction between these various senses unexamined. The interplay between these various levels is important for grasping the full significance of framing his critique in terms of 'inarticulacy.' I take the more extensive articulation of moral 'articulacy' and the exposing the various ways in which this concept illuminates Taylor's moral philosophy to be among the contributions of this thesis.

by his broader moral philosophy. The notion of moral 'articulacy' thus functions as a fruitful prism through which we can read Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy, what he sometimes calls "proceduralism"[49] or more recently "code fetishism."[50] This notion will serve as my key to my interpretation and critical defense of Taylor's position. In what follows, I will begin by sketching the basic steps of Taylor's critique in light of his notion of "inarticulacy."

## 1.1 Cramped Morals, Narrow Questions

Several critics take issue with contemporary moral theory for fetishizing moral obligation. Bernard Williams warns, "If obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether."[51] This thought leads him to downgrade moral obligations (and morality in general) to one kind of good among others.[52] Williams evokes this idea in his remark: "Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that things other than itself are important."[53] Similarly, Annette Baier charges that theory's fixation on obligations and duties hides from view the pervasive role *trust* plays in ethics.[54] Rather than grinding out a moral decision procedure, we would do better, on her view, to bring into focus the networks of trust relations that sustain moral life. While Williams and Baier are driven by different motivations, both thinkers give voice to the concern that modern moral philosophy is overwhelming preoccupied with fine-tuning theories of morally right action. Such a limited focus on moral obligation comes at the expense of a richer understanding of ethical life.[55]

---

[49] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), chapter 3.

[50] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007), 703-707.

[51] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 182. For a response to William's critique of moral obligation see Stephen L. Darwall, "Abolishing Morality" *Synthese* 72 (July 1987): 71-89.

[52] See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, especially chapters 1 and 10. We will explore this option more in chapter 5.

[53] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 184.

[54] Annette Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?" and "Trust and Antitrust," in *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), chapters 1 and 6.

[55] For other variations on this theme within the anti-theory literature see, for instance, Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983); Cheryl Noble, "Normative Ethical Theories," *The Monist* 62 (October 1979), 496-509; Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandry Ethics" *Mind*, n.s., 80 (October 1971): 552-571.

Charles Taylor joins the chorus of critics in observing that contemporary moral theory fixates on an overly limited range of interests. But unlike his fellow critics, Taylor locates the central danger of this contracted mode of moral thinking in the eclipse of "the good." Modern moral theory, he tells us, "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 it in her work, as the privileged focus of attention or will."[56] He describes modern moral theory's limited agenda as follows:

> Morality is conceived purely as a guide to *action*. It is thought to be concerned purely with what it is right to do rather than with what it is good to be. In a related way the task of moral theory is identified as defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life. In other words, morals concern what we *ought* to do; this excludes both what it is good to do, even though we aren't *obliged*…and also what it may be good (or even obligatory) to *be* or *love*, as irrelevant to ethics. In this conception there is no place for the notion of the good in either of the two common traditional senses: either the good life or the good as the object of our love or allegiance.[57]

It is this "self-willed inarticulacy about good"[58] that starts off his critique of modern moral philosophy. The result of this selective interest is, on Taylor's view, "a cramped and truncated view of morality"[59] ill-suited to making sense of ethical life as we live it. Modern moral philosophy's myopic fixation on the source and content of moral obligations betrays "a narrow view of what morality is as a dimension of human life."[60] By setting aside so much of the ethical life, it "perpetrates a drastic foreshortening of our moral domain"[61] and thereby brings about "a terrible constriction of ethical thinking."[62]

---

[56] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3; also see Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 57-58. And see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge, 1971).

[57] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 79.

[58] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 36.

[59] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

[60] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 2011), 8.

[61] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 10.

[62] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics*, ed. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge UP, 1995), 133.

From this point regarding the contracted shape of modern moral philosophy, Taylor moves to a point with widespread resonance throughout the anti-theory literature. He tells us that this shuttered perspective generates the picture of moral theory as a decision procedure: "The central task of moral philosophy is to account for what generates the obligations that hold for us. A satisfactory moral theory is generally thought to be one that defines some criterion or procedure which will allow us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do."[63] Moral theory, so conceived, encourages a "drive towards unification" and a "breathtaking systematization" of our ethical thinking.[64] The worry here is that contemporary theorists misguidedly aim to "unify the moral domain around a single consideration or basic reason, e.g., happiness or the categorical imperative, thus cramming the tremendous variety of moral considerations into a Procrustes bed."[65]

Strictly speaking, however, the limitation of moral philosophy to questions of morally right action doesn't itself entail that morality can by systematized, let alone reduced to a decision procedure. Even if a moral theorist were to focus solely on questions of right action, she need not buy into the idea that we could successfully pick out one principle to serve as *the* criterion for morality. Taylor's position thus runs together two different criticisms—(a) the idea that morally right action can be analyzed in a vacuum from other ethical questions about the good and (b) the idea morality can ultimately be conceived as a system organized around a central moral criterion or principle. Call the first thought the *independence thesis* and the second thought the *unity thesis*. What is the relationship between the two theses, even if the independence thesis doesn't entail the unity thesis? The answer is that the unity thesis presupposes the independence thesis because we couldn't presume to organize ethical thinking around a singular decision procedure without the assumption that we could isolate moral action from broader considerations of the good. That the good life could

---

[63] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 70. For a good overview of the general conception of moral 'theory' from the standpoint of its critics see Robert Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), Introduction and chapter 5. Another great list of the features of 'theory' as understood by anti-theorists is found in Martha Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 232-236.
[64] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 149.
[65] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89.

never plausibly be seen as one of merely maximizing right action has been shown by Susan Wolf's classic essay "Moral Saints."[66] Thus, insofar as we cannot disconnect the morally right from the good, the idea of a system for ethical life fails. While the independence thesis isn't sufficient to give us the unity thesis, we could only plausibly maintain the unity thesis on the assumption that the independence thesis also holds. A moral system of rules fails as an adequate model for the good life.[67] Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy's "narrow," "cramped," and "truncated" character undercuts the assumption on which a moral theory *qua* decision procedure rests. If he can show that the very idea of isolating moral obligation from the good is itself unintelligible, he challenges the very presupposition of the "drive towards unification" in moral theory.

Having identified two major strands of Taylor's argument against modern moral theory, let's return to his driving claim that concerning the eclipse of the good. If modern moral philosophy lapses into inarticulacy because it artificially isolates moral obligation from a broader conception of the good, then the meaning of "the good" is crucial to Taylor's position. The force and plausibility of his critique turns on how we unpack "the good." While this task will be primarily reserved for chapters four and five, a few comments are required at present. Most importantly, Taylor's concern for "the good" refers not to a specific version of the good, although he is committed to a particular view of the good, but rather very *general, structural feature of the ethical life*.[68] Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy begins at the meta-ethical level where he wants to show that we cannot sensibly talk about moral duties and obligations in abstraction from an underlying take on the good, whatever the content of that take might be. The key point is that his "retrieval"[69] of "the good" occurs at a structural-formal level.

At the most general level, Taylor's attempt to re-orient moral philosophy around a notion of the good is an attempt to re-initiate moral philosophy into the "meanings" constitutive of our selves

---

[66] Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (August 1982) 419-439.
[67] For one thing, it has a difficult time making sense of the different sorts of goods involved in living a good life. See Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 39. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.
[68] Abbey describes him as sketching "the permanent structures of moral life." Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 9. More specifically, he is sketching the structure of "the good."
[69] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4.

and our moral lives. Contemporary theory misses the point that "a moral agent is sensitive to, responding to, certain considerations, the ones we think of as moral; or, a moral agent is capable of responding to these considerations. To speak a dialect of Heideggerese: the agent has *moral meanings* in his/her world."[70] Seen in this light, Taylor's complaint that modern moral philosophy has no place for "the good" is simply that it has no place for the "moral meanings" that make sense of our moral life. While this puts him in the same camp as other contemporary theorists like Michael Walzer and Michelle Moody-Adams, who remind us of the importance of shared social understandings in moral thinking,[71] Taylor's argument goes further. He means something more specific by the phrase "moral meanings" as revealed in the following passage:

> If we give the full range of ethical meanings their due, we can see that the fullness of ethical life involves not just doing, but also *being*; and not just these two but also *loving* (which is shorthand here for *being moved by*, *being inspired by*) what is constitutively good. It is a reduction to think that we can capture the moral by focusing only on obligated action, as though it were of no ethical moment what you are and what you love. These are the essence of ethical life.[72]

For Taylor putting "moral meanings" back on the agenda is to not simply to remind us of the shared social meanings constituting our moral worlds, although this is also certainly also the case, but more centrally, the meanings involved in living a good life (being good) or being devoted to, drawn to, or committed to something good (loving the good). This brings us back at the lines of ethical questioning ignored by modern moral philosophy. In other words, Taylor is making that claim that "moral meanings" are bound up with issues of being good and loving the good. These are essential features of the moral life: "It is a drastic reduction to think that we can capture the moral by focusing only on obligated action, as though it were of no ethical moment *what you are* and *what you love*. These are the essence of the ethical life."[73]

---

[70] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 8-9, italics mine.
[71] See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985); Michelle M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), chapters 4 and 5.
[72] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 12, italics mine.
[73] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 72-3, italics mine.

In order to elucidate the structure of the "moral meanings" constitutive of our moral worlds, Taylor develops a constellation of specialized concepts, which detail the internal structure of "the good." This technical vocabulary elucidates the general dimensions of "the good" that any particular take on the good will include. These are what he takes to be the formal features of the good. On his account, to speak of "the good" brings into play the following dimensions: (i) *moral judgments* that cannot be nullified by a lack of desire on the agent's part ("strong evaluations"), (ii) *substantive moral concepts* in terms of which those judgments can be made ("qualitative distinctions"/"life goods"), (iii) a more complete *view of the good life* that organizes our particular evaluative concepts ("frameworks"), (iv) an *understanding of the world* such that some things show up as good ("constitutive goods"), and (v) a source of *moral motivation* ("moral sources").[74] These notions give Taylor the means to talk about what a view of the good would contain, even if these features remain implicit or unacknowledged by a theory. These terms give further structure to the notion of "moral meanings." We will expand upon and elucidate Taylor's technical terms later in this dissertation. For now the key point remains that his critique aims to expose the various aspects of the good implicitly presupposed in "narrow" accounts of right action. His technical terminology helps further express the *structural* features captured in Taylor's talk of "the good" missing from modern moral philosophy.

Framing the central problem with contemporary moral philosophy in terms of the eclipse of the good reveals the most elementary sense the notion of 'inarticulacy.' Modern moral philosophy is inarticulate because of its restricted agenda, i.e., it doesn't have anything to say about questions of 'the good life' or 'love of the good.' It is thus an *inarticulacy of silence*. This is Taylor's most basic charge against contemporary moral philosophy, but the role played by the notion of inarticulacy doesn't stop here. It continues to shape Taylor's position in several deeper ways.

---

[74] The concept of "strong evaluation" is analyzed in early essays like Taylor, "What is Moral Agency?" This vocabulary, however, achieves its fullest explication in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, part I.

## 1.2 Taylor's Ethical Holism

Why should Taylor's charge of moral inarticulacy count as a fundamental challenge to contemporary theorizing? To borrow Allan Gibbard's words, "If none of the familiar theories measures up, why doesn't that just show we need a better theory?"[75] Why can't we rebut Taylor's charge of narrowness by simply adding on to existing theories rather than rejecting them as such? Why, in other words, can't we read Taylor's critique as simply a challenge to the completeness of modern moral philosophy? We might hold that Taylor's writing adds something to our list of philosophical topics, but it doesn't alter theories of obligatory action in their essentials. On this view, accounts of the good life can be appended to whatever theories of obligation stand up to the collective scrutiny of moral philosophers. We might join Will Kymlicka in thinking that there is a kind of conceivable "division of labor"[76] available here: research into moral obligation, on the one hand, and research into the good, on the other. Jürgen Habermas, for instance, endorses such a "division of labor" between what he calls "ethics," which deals with substantive conceptions of the good life, and "morality," which is restricted to the formal reconstruction of justice.[77] On his view, substantive moral philosophy is incompatible with the insights of modernity. Consequently, "with regard to the questions that have the greatest relevance for us, philosophy retires to a metalevel and investigates only the formal properties of processes of self-understanding, without taking a position on the contents themselves."[78] The issue is whether we might, to borrow the terminology of Samuel

---

[75] Allan Gibbard, "Why Theorize How to Live with Each Other?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (June 1995): 323.

[76] See Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 170. Kymlicka advocates a limited conception of morality that concerns our obligations to others and relegates questions of the good to non-philosophical territory. He writes, "Theorists concentrate on morality, not because they think questions about the good life are not worth attending to, but because they think they are already being attended to in our non-moral modes of thinking and acting…Rather than explain why moral philosophers cannot leave the job of evaluating the good to others, Taylor mistakenly says that moral philosophers do not leave any room for others to discuss the good. Hence his arguments focus on the relatively uncontroversial claim that it is important to make qualitative judgments about the good, while neglecting the real question—namely, is it moral philosophers who must make those judgments?" (p. 170-171)

[77] Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 3-4.

[78] Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: "What is the 'Good Life'?" 4.

Scheffler, think of theorizing the good as a matter of "supplementation" rather than a "substitution" for the currently prevailing theories.[79]

Taylor, however, cannot be so easily mollified. He offers his critique as a fundamental indictment of contemporary moral thinking, not a call for an add-on to the current research programs. The supplementary approach advocated by Kymlicka and others assumes that moral obligations are logically and practically independent of ethical questions concerning the good. As Taylor puts it, "If we understand things this way, then reproaching moral philosophers for not dealing with the good is like complaining that paleontologists do not study the Second World War."[80] But Taylor rejects precisely the assumption that morality is independent of a conception of the good.[81] On his view, questions of right action and the good are bound up with each another. We cannot discretely theorize moral obligation and then simply tack on reflections concerning the good life.[82] The good life is part and parcel of a proper conception of moral obligation. Taylor insists on what we might call his *thesis of ethical holism*, i.e., the claim that the character and source of morality cannot be separated from reflection on the good life and motives that sustain it. Taylor's burden is to show why and how neglect of the good poses a fundamental challenge to theories of moral obligation, a challenge that would force us to reconsider them as a whole. We need a reason why the "division of labor" approaches to moral thinking fail to be satisfactory solutions.

One of the main tasks in this dissertation is to get clear on *whether* morality can be understood independently of the good life, i.e., whether a "division of labor" strategy can adequately

---

[79] Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 16. Scheffler uses these terms to discuss two different attitudes to the challenge of modern moral theory from the standpoint of, roughly speaking, virtue ethics, which would include Taylor among other theorists. Scheffler introduces this distinction in the context of virtue ethics understood in a broad, programmatic sense as revealed by the following quote: "I see no reason to think that the values of friendship, community, and tradition can take the place of more abstract moral notions like fairness, social justice, and the equal moral worth of persons" (p. 16).

[80] For Taylor's response to Kymlicka see Charles Taylor, "Comments and Replies," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 244.

[81] Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 243-245.

[82] Martin Löw-Beer describes Taylor's position as the thesis that "one should discuss and justify claims concerning rights or obligations only in the context of conceptions of the good life. Answers to the question of the good life give answers also to questions concerning rights and obligations." Martin Löw-Beer, "Living a Life and the Problem of Existential Impossibility, *Inquiry* 34 (1994): 223. This is correct, but it requires further specification regarding *how* the good life is to function as a context for understanding moral obligation. I hope to achieve this in the course of this reconstruction.

rebut Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy's narrowness. If it cannot, we need to explain *why* such a compartmentalizing approach fails. The following dissertation discusses Taylor's argument in defense of ethical holism, the idea that moral obligations and the good life are linked at a fundamental level and therefore cannot be combined like two discrete objects put in the same container, as it were.

Taylor expresses the basic reason why an ethical "division of labor" is doomed to failure is terms of the mantra "the good is always primary to the right."[83] But what does this mean? A clue comes from a footnote in *Sources* where Taylor assigns three meanings to the inverse phrase "the priority of the right over the good." It can mean:

> (a) the Kantian thesis that moral obligation can't be made derivative from the 'good' as utilitarians conceive it, i.e., all and any objects of people's desires; and (b) the thesis that morality is concerned only with what actions are obligatory and not with qualitative distinctions…(c) the thesis that what is important in ethical life is the obligation we have to others, e.g., to fair dealing and benevolence, and that these are incomparably more weighty than the requirements of a good, or fulfilled, or valuable, or worthwhile life.[84]

The second and third senses merit our attention here. We can identify two forms of the thesis of ethical holism in Taylor's work. I will call these respectively the *weak* and *strong* readings of ethical holism. They track the denials of (b) and (c) above, i.e., the idea that we can understand moral obligations without reference to what Taylor calls "qualitative distinctions" and the idea that moral obligations always trump concerns relating to living a flourishing life. The aim in each case is to block off the "division of labor" route traveled by theorists like Habermas and Kymlicka by showing the priority of the good. If the good is prior to morally right action, in some sense, then we can neither get an adequate grasp of morally right action in a vacuum nor understand moral obligation as something to which a conception of the good can be added.

---

[83] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87-89, quote from p. 89.

[84] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 532n66-67. Commenting on Taylor's advocacy of the primacy of the good over the right, Will Kymlicka has noted roughly these two readings. He writes, "whereas earlier theorists were concerned to describe 'the contours of a good life', modern theorists give priority to the right over the good. That is to say, according to Taylor, modern theorists give rightful obligations primacy over the pursuit of the good, both in the sense that they take precedence, should the two conflict, and in the sense that they are derived without appeal to any determinate theory of the good" (157). We can also see a suggestion of there being two lines of Taylor's critique in Rainer Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism*, trans. John M.M. Farrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 215.

Let's begin with the weak reading (call this the *holism of deliberation*). Here the point is that the good life must be viewed as the necessary context for understanding morality because we have to protect other goods from "domination," to borrow Williams's term. Given the holistic character of the ethical life, agents will potentially be confronted with conflicts between the good life and morality, i.e., between fulfilling our obligations to others and engaging in fulfilling personal "projects," to use Williams's term.[85] Taylor gives us the following example: "I don't just throw away my career as a concert pianist to raise an extra few dollars for Oxfam."[86] Only by being attentive to both kinds of consideration can we hope to have a plausible conception of morality. Any adequate moral theory must account for the interplay between moral claims and the pursuit of a happy life. Taylor advances this line of argument in response to Kymlicka. He writes:

> Ethical life in fact faces us with choices in which everything: moral principles, goods, interests, our own future and that of others, all come into consideration. Unless we have some way of showing a priori that some of these always and exceptionlessly take precedence over others, we cannot in fact afford to segregate the discipline of practical philosophy into watertight compartments. If this is so, then the reproach I want to level at proceduralists is a serious one: that they don't give enough attention to the good to determine whether and when the moral principles they offer ought to be modified to accommodate its demands. To practice a division of labour here amounts to telling one half of the story.[87]

Moderating the tendency of morality to displace other goods requires attention to the good life. Moral obligation, Taylor's argument runs, must be understood within a unified account of practical deliberation because the deliberating agent must weigh a variety of considerations.[88] Consequently, we cannot isolate our reflection on moral obligation from a conception of the good life without impairing our ability to think about morality in the context of those broader pursuits. It is the downfall of contemporary moral theory that it has no way of doing justice to the range of goods at

---

[85] See Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," and "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), 1-19 and 20-39. Thomas Nagel explicitly frames this as a conflict between 'morality' and 'the good life.' See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 195-200.
[86] Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 63.
[87] Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 245.
[88] See Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 170-183.

stake in practical deliberation.[89] On this reading, the reason that morality becomes distorted without a conception of the good life is that we no longer keep in mind the place of moral considerations within a life that has much more going on. Here Taylor's work intersects with that of Harry Frankfurt, Bernard Williams, and Susan Wolf.[90] All of these thinkers share the concern that morality, if misconceived, can come to have deleterious effects on practical deliberation. It ends up requiring the unacceptable sacrifice of other genuine goods. Nevertheless, as I shall argue in chapter five, Taylor's argument is superior in preserving the importance attached to morality.

We can identify a second, stronger conception of ethical holism in Taylor's work (call this the *holism of significance*). While the previous interpretation saw the good as necessary to morality because both factored into the overarching practical deliberations of a moral agent, it drew no direct link between morality and the good life. The argument simply maintained that both the good and the right were relevant to an agent's deliberations. We can, however, find a much stronger interpretation of connection between morality and the good in Taylor's writing. On this reading, we misunderstand the nature of morality if we sever it from the good because moral obligations only count as such insofar as we see them as good ways to be. Taylor writes:

> The obligation to do and the goodness in being are two facets, as it were, of the same sense. Each totally without the other would be something very different from our moral sense: a mere compulsion, on one hand; a detached sense of the superiority of one way over another, on the other hand, comparable to my aesthetic appreciation of cumulus over nimbus clouds, not making any demands on me as an agent.[91]

Here the argument is that the good life must serve as the prism through which we understand moral obligation. Morality and the good life, although not co-extensive, stand in a mutually supporting

---

[89] He writes, "A procedural ethic of rules cannot cope with the prospect that the sources of good might be plural. A single valid procedure grinds our the rules, and if it works properly it will not generate contradictory injunctions; just as a well-ordered formal system won't generate contradictory theorems." Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 39.

[90] See Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," and "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck*, 1-19 and 20-39; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, especially chapters 1 and 10; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (August 1982): 419-439; Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 299-315; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-225; Susan Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 203-223; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010); Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).

[91] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 9.

relation. In order to properly understand the reason giving force of moral considerations, we have to understand them as part of the good life.[92] More specifically, it requires re-situating our conception of morality in terms of "the richer background languages" that articulate our conception of the good.[93] These make clear "the point" implicit in our judgments of the morally right.[94] These in turn are situated within a broader conception of an inhabited moral world. Here Taylor draws on his technical vocabulary to make the connection between morally right action and the good. It remains a task for another chapter to determine how this works and whether Taylor succeeds.

While I have distinguished the weak and strong readings of ethical holism, they work together to form a unified attack on procedural theories and supply an answer to proponents of a moral "division of labor." The strong thesis of ethical holism establishes the need to see morality in terms of the good, and the thesis of weak ethical holism reveals the need to place morality in a broader view of practical deliberation oriented by the good. The details of how these two theses fit together and complement each other will be explored at the end of chapter five.

Taylor's charge of moral inarticulacy, if successful, poses a fundamental challenge to modern moral philosophy, something that cannot be remedied by merely supplementing modern moral theories or carving up ethical reflection into two distinct spaces of reflection. Taylor's argument is not simply that contemporary theories don't deal with something interesting or important. Rather, they are self-subverting in neglecting the good. They cannot make proper sense of moral obligation. The interconnections between the right and the good render the "division of labor" approach incoherent. An articulate conception of morally right action must be seen within this broader frame of the good. The good in a rather multi-faceted manner counts as the crucial condition for moral articulacy.

---

[92] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87-90.
[93] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3. Italics Mine.
[94] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 88-89.

**1.3 The Unavowed Ancient Shape of the Modern Moral Life**

What kind of objection is it to call a moral theory "inarticulate?" A good place to start looking for an answer is ordinary language. What does it commonly mean when we describe someone as "inarticulate"? For starters, it is a negative evaluation of a person's ability to express herself. She may be foggily aware of what she wants to communicate, but she is at a loss for the right words. Inarticulacy is a failure to get clear on one's thoughts, specifically to formulate one's thoughts in language. Inarticulacy does not entail the inability to recognize a phenomenon but rather implies some kind of awareness of a phenomenon, even if such an understanding is vague and indeterminate and even if one cannot find the right words to describe it. The inarticulate agent may be able to recognize what she wanted to say in another person's account, even if she cannot for whatever reason find the words herself. It is this failure to find that right words that stands at the heart of our ordinary use of the notion of "inarticulacy."

Taylor's use of the concept of 'inarticulacy' is continuous with ordinary usage in the above-described sense. Moral inarticulacy is an expressive failing. It introduces a gap between our ethical life and our reflective conceptualization of it. Indeed, the very logic of moral inarticulacy presupposes some kind of awareness of the phenomenon of morality such that there could be a rift between our expressive capacity and our awareness of the underlying phenomenon. If the gap were to be eliminated, we would cease to be inarticulate about it. Rather the fundamental phenomenon itself would have undergone a change. The moral life would have been flattened out to match the poverty of our reflective discourse. But this is not Taylor's story; his is a story of inarticulacy not straightforward reduction.[95] While Taylor does find procedural moral theory "inconsistent,"[96] the notion of "inarticulacy" reveals it to be a special kind of inconsistency, which posits some kind of gap between our theoretical self-understanding and the actual character of our ethical life. Call this *the*

---

[95] See Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 22-23.
[96] Charles Taylor, "Language and Society" in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action*, ed. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 30.

*constitutive tension of moral inarticulacy.* The tension definitive of moral inarticulacy resonates in many

chambers of Taylor's moral thought. Let me briefly sketch a few of the forms in which it appears.

  *I. Moral Psychology.* At the level of moral psychology, 'inarticulacy' refers to a tension within a

moral agent, a gap between her reflective conception of her moral life and her lived experience,

specifically her moral feelings. It is a gap between thinking and feeling.[97] The language she has

available to describe herself is inadequate for her moral situation. More specifically, talk of

inarticulacy posits something at the affective level that chafes against our own cognitive beliefs in

regard to the moral life. The ill-formed shoe blisters the foot. Taylor reveals this kind of gap when he

alleges that contemporary moral theory "cannot capture the peculiar background sense, central to

much of our moral life, that something incomparably important is involved."[98] Taylor's choice of the

word "sense" here is not incidental, but rather points to the importance of moral feelings in his

account, a point we will explore at length in the next chapter. As we shall see our feelings count for

Taylor as our fundamental point of "access" to the moral realm.[99] Taylor's claim here, a claim

integral to his overall critique, embodies a gap between the reflective resources of the moral theory

and a pre-theoretical "sense" of morality's importance. It reveals a tension between our feelings and

our reflective thought, that is, it reveals inarticulacy. Taylor's claim is that we are morally inarticulate

because we can't aptly the significance our moral commitments.  Two theses are presupposed by

---

[97] Compare to Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 132-133. Joas also describes Taylor's notion of inarticulacy as involving a 'gap' but his characterization is importantly different from my own. He writes, "A gap can open up between our moral feelings and our reflective values. Perhaps we realize with astonishment that we fail to feel guilt or outrage even though we ourselves or others have infringed what we took to be our values. Conversely, perhaps we are tormented by feelings of guilt or are seized by outrage even though we are under the impression that none of our consciously endorsed values has been infringed. The relationship between strong evaluations embodied in our moral feelings and our consciously endorsed values is therefore not without tension" (133). He then goes on to see articulation as the solution to this gap. He writes, "The role of articulation consists precisely in bridging the gap between moral feelings and reflective values. When we articulate our moral feelings, we give them a form in which they can be discussed" (133). Joas's conception sees our feelings as not lining up with reflective values whereas I see Taylor's notion of articulation as pointing, most fundamentally, to a different kind of gap— namely, the gap between unclear, murky feelings and an explicit conceptualization of them. Joas's conception starts with a clearly stated difference between emotions and values. My reading of Taylor brings out how these two can suffer from a less clear conflict.
[98] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 87.
[99] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8; Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 62.

Taylor's notion of inarticulacy: (1) we lack the ability to express *why* and *how* morality matters to us, but nevertheless, (2) morality (broadly construed) matters very much to us. Taylor's critique assumes both of these lines of thought. Without some pre-existing grasp of the ethical life, nothing could be left unexpressed by moral theory. There would be nothing about which to be inarticulate. Theory would exhaust our moral lives; reductive theories would have simply made over the moral life. But this is not Taylor's story.[100] His account is that we are "inarticulate," and the very logic of moral inarticulacy presupposes such a rift as the one described above.

*II. Motivation.* This tension between an agent's thinking and feeling is occasioned by a second form of the inarticulacy gap—namely, one a theory and the moral motivations behind it.[101] This is a species of theory/practice distinction. Morality is presented by moral theory in a certain light, but in practice, the sentiments motivating the moral view assume a quite different form. Taylor thinks that our moral lives are richer than the impoverished moral theory that attempts to represent and guide them. Here Taylor echoes the widespread complaint that contemporary theory is reductionistic.[102] As we saw above, however, Taylor traces the source of contemporary theory's poverty back to its neglect of the good life and love of the good. Isolating morality from the good comes at a cost. But the point of characterizing the relationship between reductive moral theory and a far richer ethical life in terms of "inarticulacy" tells us something more about that relationship. As he puts it:

> any theory which claims to make the right primary really reposes on such a notion of the good, in the sense (a) that one needs to articulate this view of the good in order to make its motivations clear; and (b) that an attempt to hold on to the theory of the right while denying any such underpinning in a theory of the good would collapse in incoherence.[103]

Taylor's charge of "inarticulacy" thus carries with it the assumption that without a notion of the good, a moral theory would cease to make sense. Thus, to the extent that modern moral theories of isolated

---

[100] Taylor points to this point as a central difference between himself and MacIntyre. See Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," especially 22-23. Taylor writes, for instance, "Our way of life never sinks to the full horror that would attend it (I believe) if we could be truly consistent Benthamites" (23).

[101] Cf. Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 43-44.

[102] For a good overview of the anti-theory literature see Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," *Ethics* 107 (January 1997): 252-262. The thesis that moral theory is reductionistic, according to Leiter, is part of the common core constituting anti-theory positions.

[103] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 28.

obligation do make sense, they are disingenuous with regard to the place of the good in their thought. Modern theorists thus vacillate, Taylor claims, between self-deception and incoherence. Inarticulacy enters the picture because our self-conception fails to line up with the implicit shape of our moral lives. As Iris Murdoch once commented, "if a moral philosophy does not give a satisfactory or sufficiently rich account of what we unphilosophically know to be goodness, then away with it."[104] For Taylor, like his teacher Murdoch, the failure to render our pre-philosophical understandings lucid counts against contemporary moral philosophy.

We moderns live our lives, Taylor claims, in implicitly ancient categories, even if we our moral theories are cast in distinctively modern terms. This is guaranteed by a necessary connection between the good and making sense of our own reactions, a point we will explore in detail in chapter four. As a consequence, obligation-fixated, modern moral theorists "will always be in truth more 'Aristotelian' than they believe, surreptitiously relying on notions like 'virtue' and 'the good life', even while they repudiate them on the level of theory."[105] Moderns are also more Platonic than they think. The good life exerts a "magnetic" pull, to borrow Iris Murdoch's image.[106] An implicit love of the good, Taylor claims, fuels our attachment to morality. As he puts it, "defenders of the most antiseptic procedural ethic are unavowedly inspired by visions of the good."[107] In living our moral lives, we care about leading good lives and are motivated, on Taylor's reading, by some kind of deep concern for what we take to be good, even if we don't think about it in this way.[108]

*III. Ontology.* An implicit commitment to the good raises the question of what kind of ontological presuppositions are required in order to justify such views of the good.[109] This is a third area where Taylor's notion of "inarticulacy" comes into play for he complains of their neglect of the

---

[104] Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1997), 205.

[105] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 22.

[106] See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 41, 73, 97, 100.

[107] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 504.

[108] Taylor frequently picks on utilitarians in this regard. He writes, for example, "The utilitarian lives within a moral horizon which cannot be explicated by his own moral theory." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 31.

[109] I'm grateful to conversations with David McPherson for reminding me of this dimension of Taylor's thinking.

issue of moral ontology. In his view, "there reigns an ideologically induced illusion about the nature of the moral ontology that the thinkers concerned actually rely on."[110] When it comes to contemporary moral theories, specifically those of a naturalist persuasion, he spots "a tension between phenomenology and ontology."[111] Taylor worries whether the meaning morality has for us, specifically that of being a "higher" way of living, is really compatible with the either the total neglect of moral ontology or the reductionistic naturalist ontologies underpinning many contemporary moral theories.[112] At this level inarticulacy refers to "a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe, even pride themselves on believing, on the one had, and what they need to make sense of some of their reactions, on the other."[113] In other words, Taylor thinks that we must confront "the issue of how to align our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology, how to resolve a seeming lack of fit…either by enriching one's ontology, or by revising or challenging the phenomenology"[114] We suffer from one sense of moral inarticulacy to the extent that we cannot or will not acknowledge the deeper ontological presuppositions of our moral beliefs, feelings, and commitments—or so Taylor's argument runs.[115]

Moral inarticulacy does not only manifest itself in several forms, but it also points the way forward towards moral articulacy. On Taylor's view, moral articulacy requires that we translate the insights of modern moral philosophy into a framework that makes explicit its commitment to the good. Taylor writes, "procedural theories seem to me to be incoherent. Better put, that to be made coherent they require restatement in substantive form."[116] Modern moral philosophy is thus not

---

[110] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9.

[111] Charles Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 310.

[112] See Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology" and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 1.

[113] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9. As he writes, "There is a very controversial but very important *job of articulation* to be done here, in the teeth of the people concerned, which can show to what extent the real spiritual basis of their own moral judgments deviates from what is officially admitted" (9-10, italics mine).

[114] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 609.

[115] At points Taylor moves from (a) defending the need for articulating a moral ontology to (b) arguing for a particular moral ontology, which captures our moral intuitions. He writes, "It is not merely formulating what people already implicitly but unproblematically acknowledge; nor is it showing what people really rely on in the teeth of their ideological denials. Rather it could only be carried forward by showing that one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses, whether we recognize this or not" (10). This point is most fully developed in *Sources of the Self*, chapter 25. I will discuss this move in § 1.4.

[116] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 27.

doomed to incoherence or inarticulacy. Rather Taylor holds out the possibility of coherently

translating its core insights into a substantive, roughly ancient looking framework. Otherwise put, we

can't help but appeal to and think in terms of ancient categories, but these do not surface in our

theories. Taylor's claim is that ethical practice embodies a roughly ancient form. This is the shape of

our moral sense, so to speak. Moral articulacy requires that we translate the insights of modern moral

philosophy into a form that does justice to the place of the good. We might say that Taylor's meta-

ethical critique thus ushers in a virtue ethic for the modern age.[117]

Taylor's critique of modern moral inarticulacy thus presupposes (a) that modern moral

theory has no place for the good and (b) that the expression of our moral life requires roughly

ancient categories, i.e., a concept of the good life, virtues, and the good as the object of our love. An

appropriate view of the good may further require (c) certain ontological commitments to support or

uphold to make it work, i.e., the broader contexts necessary for a fully adequate understanding of the

moral life, even of moderns.[118] We moderns are inarticulate about our morality if these theses hold.

Yet Taylor also suggests a way forward. Taylor's thesis is that only when we reflect on morality in

connection with ancient notions of the good life and love of the good, can we express the

importance morality has for us. Taylor's critique of modern moral inarticulacy is thus an attempted

"retrieval"[119] of older structures of moral thinking to be filled in with modern content. The notion of

inarticulacy draws our attention to several gaps that form in the modern moral life—between

thinking and feeling, theory and practice, and moral phenomenology and ontology. But it also points

the way forward towards moral articulacy possible in recognizing the yet un-avowed ancient shape of

---

[117] Arto Laitinen and Nicholas Smith have made similar observations. As Laitinen aptly puts it, "Taylor's approach can perhaps be called modernized and individualized Aristotelianism, where modernization refers to the role of identity, autonomy, authenticity and value pluralism." Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 33. Similarly Smith observes that Taylor's "basic model is Aristotelian in inspiration, though with important expressivist accruements. Human beings are creatures with distinctive natural capacities, capacities that are realized or 'expressed', in different forms through history and across cultures." Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002), 101.
[118] We will discuss this at greater length in chapter 4 of this dissertation.
[119] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-4, 520.

the modern moral life. But to do so requires us to radically rethink the character of modern moral philosophy.

## 1.4 The Two Phases of Taylor's Moral Philosophy

So far we have discussed Taylor's central claim that contemporary moral theory is too contracted. By focusing solely on moral obligation, theory disconnects our conceptions of moral obligation from our broader understanding of the good. Within the "cramped" frameworks of modern moral philosophy, moral agents no longer have the resources needed for moral articulacy. The notion of articulacy not only orients Taylor's *critique* of modern moral philosophy but also his *positive vision* for ethics. In this final section I want to indicate where Taylor's critique falls within the scope of his moral philosophy taken as a whole and how the notion of inarticulacy structures this bigger picture.

We can distinguish two phases in Taylor's moral philosophy: the *critical* and the *constructive*.[120] In alleging that modern moral philosophy carves out too narrow a space of concerns and isolates morality from a broader conception of the good, Taylor draws our attention to an underlying set of assumptions responsible, he thinks, for distorting our conception of ethical life. His charge of moral inarticulacy is designed to highlight the ill fit between prevailing moral theories and the actual shape of ethical life. The claim is we cannot make sense of how we experience the moral life within the confines of contemporary theory and thus rely on under-the-table moral resources and inspiration, as

---

[120] These two phases of argument are only concerned with his ethics, a slice of Taylor's overall corpus, although they are connected to and dependent on other areas of his work. Looking at Taylor's work as a whole, Nicholas H. Smith identifies "negative" and "positive" moments in it. The "negative" moment is his critique of 'naturalism,' which attempts to theorize humans solely in terms of the natural sciences and dismiss the meanings constitutive of human experience. Smith sees the "positive" moment in Taylor's philosophy to be twofold: (a) the transcendental argument establishing the inescapable place of meanings in constituting human agency and (b) the historical investigation of the forces at play in shaping the content of those meanings. See Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 6-9. My distinction, by contrast, falls within Smith's broader scheme. Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy is connected, albeit not necessarily in a straightforward way, to his critique of naturalism. We will discuss this relationship at length in chapter two. Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy, as we shall see, draws on both the transcendental and historical dimensions of Smith's "positive" moment. My talk of a constructive phase of Taylor's moral philosophy refers more specifically to moves Taylor makes after he tears down the limited framework governing modern moral philosophy.

it were. The argument, if successful, establishes the need to throw off the existing meta-ethical assumptions that constrain our moral consciousness. In so doing, it would also establish the importance of a conception of the good for our ethical thinking.

The potential upshot of Taylor's critique establishes the inadequacy of contemporary theory's view of morality and the necessity of situating morality in a broader field organized by a conception of the good. It does not, however, say anything about the content of the good. As we noted before, his argument establishing a necessary link between the good and the right occurs at a formal level. It remains an open question how we should conceive of the good, i.e., the substance with which we should fill out our ethics. But we cannot articulately engage moral reflection—and this is the upshot of Taylor's critique—without reference, at some level, to the good. He wants to show a structural flaw in the prevailing "meta-construal"[121] of morality that shapes the concerns of modern moral theory, or to be more precise, excludes certain topics of conversation from ever getting a hearing. By showing the inadequacy of the contracted conception of morality, Taylor attempts to re-frame the questions governing moral theory in such a way that re-orients ethical reflection around the good. This is what I'm calling the critical phase of Taylor's moral philosophy.

Once Taylor has broadened the field of ethical reflection to include the good, he can raise questions regarding *how* the content of the good ought to be filled in. One key question here is whether the good life should be conceived in immanent or transcendent terms.[122] His recent work entitled *A Secular Age* is an extended defense of a transcendent conception of the good life. When Taylor does venture concrete claims about the character of the good rooted in the Christian tradition, he usually does so in a tenuous fashion that differs in strength and style of his indictment of modern

---

121 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 100.
122 See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Chapter 16, § 2. The strongest textual evidence for this two phase approach comes from Taylor's essay "Iris Murdoch and the Moral Life," where he argues (gesturing to Murdoch's work along the way) that we need to abandon "morality" for "ethics," roughly his critique of contemporary theory, and then push forward by raising the question of the place of the "transcendent" in ethics, specifically whether or not the good life can satisfactorily be understood in wholly immanent terms. Indeed, the essay on Murdoch provides, I think, a good road-map not only for the logical set-up of Taylor's work in moral philosophy but also his own intellectual trajectory since roughly the 1980s, the first half of that essay treating themes from *Sources* and the second half treating themes from *A Secular Age*. Compare to the defense of an immanent conception of the good in William E. Connolly, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 166-186.

moral philosophy.[123] This is indicative of the fact that Taylor is running a two-phase campaign against contemporary theory. His critique of modern moral philosophy first establishes the need for acknowledging a conception of the good, and then he turns to advancing a specific understanding of the good.

The key point I want to underscore is that his tentative advocacy of a Christian ethic presupposes the relevance of the good life to morality, and this claim is established in his critique of contemporary theory. Here again we see the two phases. His present work proceeds from the broader conception of moral philosophy established in what I am calling the critical phase of his writing. It argues for a particular conception of the good, but this presupposes Taylor's prior argument that the good matters to moral thinking. We might say that at one level Taylor defends the need for "a vision of the good," while at another level he puts forth "a vision of the good."[124] While these two phases are mingled in his work, his earlier writings tend to focus on the former line of argument, while his more recent writings lay increasingly greater emphasis on the latter. In this dissertation, I will rarely, and even then briefly, allude to the second, constructive phase of Taylor's argument. In so doing I will gesture at lines of continuity across Taylor's moral philosophy, but I restrict myself here to primarily engaging Taylor's foundational arguments against the "narrow" conception of morality, i.e., his critique of contemporary theory. My concern is how Taylor bursts the bounds of the "cramped" morality of modern theory rather than the direction he goes once he has escaped that narrow frame.

The strongest reason to read Taylor's ethical project in terms of a two-phase approach is that it reconciles several different, seemingly competing strands of his thinking—namely, (1) his emphasis

---

[123] Taylor writes, for instance, "I have a *hunch* that there is a scale of affirmation of humanity by God which cannot be matched by humans rejecting God. *But I am far from having proof.* Let's try to see." Charles Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, eds. James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994), 226, italics mine.

[124] For the phrases 'a vision of the good' see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 77.

on the dialogical character of human life,[125] (2) his trenchant defense of ethical and political pluralism,[126] (3) his discontent with modern moral philosophy and finally, (4) his own personal religious commitments and digressions on the ethical significance of *agape*.[127] By seeing Taylor's moral philosophy as consisting of two moments—one critical, one constructive—we can place his various commitments within a unified vision of ethics. His critique of modern moral philosophy can be seen as an attempt to clear a space for a more genuinely pluralistic dialogue by eliminating certain constraints on and obstructions to ethical reflection.[128] He does this by exposing modern moral theory's necessary reliance on the good, even if the theory itself neglects or denies it. This establishes a broader arena for moral reflection that takes place in the substantive, "thick"[129] ethical languages that constitute our conceptions of the good. Once freed from the self-imposed constraints of modern moral philosophy, a wider range of ethical positions and self-understandings can find their place at the table, so to speak.[130] No longer able to limit the agenda and keep out a wider range of

---

[125] See, for instance, Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, eds. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 304-314; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2.

[126] See, for instance, Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard UP, 1995), chapter 12.

[127] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516-521; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 737-744; Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections*, 182-185.

[128] Cf. Michael L. Morgan, "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), 49-66. Morgan's position is similar to that defended in this dissertation in two ways. First, in contrast to critics that want to read Taylor's moral philosophy as essentially insisting on a Catholic position, Morgan reads Taylor in a way that highlights his pluralistic side. Second, Morgan highlights how Taylor's notion of 'articulation' is allied to his defense of pluralism. Unlike this thesis, however, he neither connects this to a two-phase reading of Taylor's moral philosophy nor extensively examines the notion of 'articulation' and its implications for moral philosophy. Indeed, his discussion has relatively little to do with Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy. From a political standpoint, Taylor's pluralism has been aptly examined by Mark Redhead. He touches on an underlying conflict between Taylor's "openness" and the "particularity" of his own spirituality. See Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), especially chapters 6 and 7. Distinguishing between two phases of argument helps to reconcile these two forces within Taylor's thought.

[129] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 129, 140; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), chapter 1. Williams and Geertz use the term to pick out different dimensions of roughly the same kind of local, value-laden language; Taylor draws on both them. See especially Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3.

[130] This is consistent with what Taylor describes the take-away from his recent *A Secular Age*: "I think what we badly need is a conversation between a host of different positions, religious, nonreligious, antireligious, humanistic, antihumanistic, and so on, in which we eschew mutual caricature and try to understand what 'fulness' means for the other." Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," in *Varieities of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010), 318.

ethical self-understandings, Taylor enables moral philosophy to take a pluralistic turn. At this point

Taylor can raise questions concerning the importance of transcendence to the good life, a point

closely related to his own Catholicism. In light of what I'm calling his two-phase approach to moral

philosophy, we can see his defense of a transcendent good as a more specific move within the

broadened field cleared by his critique of modern moral philosophy.

While Taylor's critique of modern moral theory paves the way for a broadened, pluralistic

framework for ethical reflection and dialogue, this space is not neutral. Most notably, it is

incompatible with those moral views that presuppose a strict separation between the right and the

good.[131] These would be admissible partners in moral dialogue but if the above arguments are

correct, their theories would have to be reformulated in a way acknowledged their substantive ethical

commitments. The emerging intellectual landscape is more open than the meta-ethical enclosures

countenanced by contemporary theory. The character of the good life, if Taylor is right, must be on

the agenda for moral philosophy. He also stresses the persisting role that positive motivations of

love, devotion, and inspiration play in our ethical lives, even if we suppress our awareness of it.

Questions regarding the nature of the good life and the source of moral attraction count, for Taylor,

not simply as questions that *can* legitimately be raised by moral philosophers but rather as the

questions that *need to* be addressed by moral philosophers.

Since the notion of moral articulacy is itself a formal notion, albeit one with substantive

consequences for moral thinking, it entails that moral philosophy can't help but be marked by a

certain shape, whose dimensions Taylor elaborates through his specialized vocabulary. We need to

view the right through the lens of the good (strong reading of ethical holism) and/or at least in light

of good (weak reading of ethical holism). In other words, Taylor's critique, if successful, establishes

---

[131] As defended by "division of labor" theorists like Kymlicka and Habermas. This lack of neutrality can take on a skepticical tone. As Mark Redhead writes, "despite his professed partiality of his spiritual vision, Taylor is committed to promoting a moral foundation—in which this spiritual vision is central—for his deeply diverse politics that claims to articulate the ontological features of the Western moral universe. This leaves Taylor facing concerns that his account of this moral horizon imposes a problematical limit to the potential values that citizens of contemporary Western liberal democracies can share and the voices they can recognize." Redhead, *Charles Taylor*, 4.

our need for articulacy, reveals the present inarticulacy of modern moral philosophy, and opens a space for the articulation of the good. This is phase one. But from here we still need to articulate the good. Here we encounter a plurality of substantive articulations that can be taken up in ethical dialogue. This is phase two. The notion of moral articulacy structures Taylor's two-phase account.

The above discussion has sought to demonstrate how the notion of "inarticulacy," Taylor's go-to term for characterizing the failings of modern moral philosophy, is a clue to understanding his overall position. It reveals at several different levels how his overall position works. But what has been said so far is quite schematic. Without going into the details of Taylor's moral philosophy, I have sought merely to sketch the general contours of the position. From here we move on to interpreting and revising Taylor's position at a finer level of resolution. If I am right that 'articulacy' provides us an insight into Taylor's position, we need to get a clearer grasp on the notion of 'articulation' from which it is derived. It is to this task we now turn.

## Chapter 2: Articulating Articulation I:

## Naturalism, Meaning, and Moral Theory

What does it mean to talk about 'articulacy' in a moral sense? This chapter attempts to address this question by unpacking the root concept of 'articulation' as it is formed in the context of Taylor's critique of naturalism, which challenges the idea that natural scientific models count as the ultimate explanatory idiom for everything, including human beings. Against this model he insists that we are essentially "self-interpreting animals," and thus must be understood through the meanings constitutive of our self-understandings. At the center of this alternative conception of moral agency we find articulation. This chapter also takes up Taylor's charge that naturalism exerts a reductionistic influence on moral theory. A closer look at self-consciously naturalistic ethical theories calls into question, however, the link between naturalism and reductionistic moral thinking. I ultimately side with Taylor's critics in suggesting that his argument fails against moderate, non-reductive versions of naturalism and argue that articulacy is compatible with a non-reductive version of ethical naturalism, so long as they acknowledge the ineliminability of human meanings.          Nevertheless, by framing the moral life in terms of 'articulacy,' Taylor shifts the terms of the discussion in a way hospitable to non-naturalistic, religious ethics. Once he has established a framework centered on the articulation of our moral sentiments, we confront the further question of what best expresses those feelings. Religious ethical outlooks too can be considered articulations of our moral sentiments on Taylor's view. The meta-ethical framework emerging from his critique of modern moral philosophy is thus *hospitable* to religious positions as well as moderate, non-reductive naturalisms. Here we see how Taylor's meta-ethics is meant to be a more broadly pluralistic position than is standardly found among modern moral philosophies. It is within this framework that Taylor voices his own "hunch" that a theistic ethic will best express commonly shared intuitions.

**2.1 Naturalism and Self-Interpreting Animals**

In his writings on human agency Taylor advances his own version of the philosophical hermeneutics developed in the work of thinkers like Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer.[132] He encapsulates the central insight of this tradition in the thesis that "Human beings are self-interpreting animals."[133] By this he means that our interpretations play a deep, constitutive role in making us the kind of beings that we are. He writes, "To say that man is a self-interpreting animal is not just to say that he has some compulsive tendency to form reflexive views of himself, but rather that as he is, he is *always partly constituted by self-interpretation*, that is, by his understanding of the imports which impinge on him."[134] The implication of the self-interpreting animal thesis is that we cannot properly understand human beings without taking into consideration the meanings that constitute their worlds. That is to say, explanations that have no place for these meanings fail to explain what we are as human beings.

Taylor deploys the "self-interpreting animals" thesis to halt what he sees as the overextension of natural scientific explanation.[135] Taylor's bugbear is the relentless spread of a reductive variant of naturalism that grants "the natural sciences a paradigm status for all forms of knowledge."[136] This amounts to "the belief that we ought to understand human beings in terms continuous with the sciences of extra-human nature."[137] It is, in other words, "the belief that humans as part of nature are in the end best understood by sciences continuous in their methods and ontology with modern natural science."[138] The issue here isn't whether human beings *can* be understood in terms of, say, chemistry, evolutionary biology, the cognitive sciences and so on—an

---

[132] For a detailed account of how Taylor fits into this line of philosophy see Nicholas H. Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 29-51. Smith rightly emphasizes that Taylor's unique contribution to philosophical hermeneutics is his explicitly *ethical* character.

[133] Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 45.

[134] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 72.

[135] See Charles Taylor, "Introduction," "Self-Interpreting Animals," and "The Concept of a Person" in *Human Agency and Language*, 1-12, chapter 2 and chapter 4.

[136] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 79.

[137] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 80.

[138] Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 137.

uncontroversial claim. Rather the issue is whether the languages of natural sciences amount to *the sole ultimate explanatory idiom* of the world, human beings included. So conceived, naturalistic explanations, the only legitimate explanations, "must avoid anthropocentric properties…and give an account of things in absolute terms."[139] In using the term 'absolute' Taylor is invoking Bernard Williams's notion of an "absolute" take on things, i.e., a view of "what is there *anyway.*"[140] Such a position draws back from the world of human experience and seeks to achieve an explanatory standpoint "to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities."[141] The ideal here is explaining things in terms of, say, physics, chemistry, or biology rather than in the meanings and "anthropocentric" concepts employed in our ordinary self-conceptions. If such an account were successful, Taylor holds, "we shall be able to treat man, like everything else, as an object among other objects, characterizing him purely in terms of properties which are independent of his experience…and treat the lived experience of, for example, sensation as epiphenomenon, or perhaps as a misdescription of what is really a brain-state."[142]

Taylor insists that the explanatory competence of natural science faces in principle limits. The self-interpreting animals thesis marks the point where this model fails. Regardless of how satisfactorily it might deal with the natural world, the "absolute" perspective of natural science fails to account for human beings because it cannot express the meanings and significances experienced from within the human standpoint. It has no place for our self-understandings and the values integral to human life. In Taylor's words,

> there can be no absolute understanding of what we are as persons, and this in two obvious respects. A being who exists only in self-interpretation cannot be understood absolutely; and one who can only be understood against the background of distinctions of worth cannot be captured by a scientific language which essentially aspires to neutrality. Our personhood cannot be treated scientifically in exactly the same way we approach our organic being.[143]

---

[139] Taylor, "Introduction" in *Human Agency and Language*, 2.

[140] Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 1978), 48.

[141] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 139.

[142] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 47.

[143] Taylor, "Introduction," *Human Agency and Language.* For an extended treatment of the centrality of meaning to Taylor's thought see Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002). As Smith puts it elsewhere, "the theme of meaning-constitution in relation to human subjectivity runs like a red thread through Taylor's work on epistemology, philosophy of language, and ethics." Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," 32.

Taylor's strategy is to point out the limits of the external, naturalistic standpoint by showing the incomprehensibility of human agency on its terms. To say that human beings are constituted by their self-interpretations is to say that the meanings making up those interpretations are not, as it were, an optional extra. The key idea is that understanding who we are as humans requires more than can be expressed in terms of the natural sciences. More specifically, it requires understanding ourselves from within the various meanings that make up the world of human experience, including specifically those values that make up our shared moral worlds. If Taylor is right, the perspective of the natural sciences runs up against a fundamental limit, and the world of human meaning is saved from reduction. The self-interpreting animals thesis locates a space of irreducible human meaning, articulates its basic structure, and thereby sets boundaries to the spread of natural scientific models. At least, that's his objective.[144]

Strikingly (and not without consequence) Taylor deploys the same basic argument in defense of the reality of ethical values. An important implication of reductionist naturalism, which insists on the sole reality of the "absolute" perspective, is that ethical values along with other "anthropocentric properties" would not count as real, at least not as real as whatever account is given from an "absolute perspective." They would be seen as a projection of some sort.[145] At this level of analysis, ethical values are under the same threat as other perspectival notions. Both ethical and non-ethical "anthropocentric properties" confront the imperious onslaught of naturalistic reduction. But this alliance offers moral values a refuge for if we cannot eliminate the meanings constitutive of human "self-interpretation" without failing to understand ourselves, then ethical notions are granted the same protection from reduction insofar as they are part of our self-interpretations. The key idea here is that moral realism piggybacks, as it were, on the "self-interpreting animals" thesis. As Taylor asks,

---

[144] This program is most clearly set forth in a series of Taylor's early articles. See Taylor, "Introduction," "What is Human Agency?," "Self-Interpreting Animals," and "The Concept of a Person" in *Human Agency and Language,* chapters 1, 2, and 4.

[145] Taylor's cites Mackie and Blackburn as his targets. See J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 38-42; Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 1-22.

"what ought to trump the language in which I actually live my life?"[146] The reality granted to moral values is the same reality granted to the meanings that are constitutive of our self-interpretations. For such reasons, we might follow Rainer Forst in calling Taylor's position "hermeneutic realism."[147]

Taylor formulates the priority of moral articulation in terms of what he calls "the Best Account Principle" (BA Principle).[148] This is, as I have been arguing, an adaptation or modulation of the "self-interpreting animals thesis." The idea common to both is that we cannot understand human beings without understanding the interpretations within which they couch their lives, and that includes our ethical languages. Taylor writes:

> 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 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…What are the requirements of 'making sense' of our lives? These requirements are not yet met if we have some theoretical language which purports to explain behaviour from the observer's standpoint but is of no use to the agent in making sense of his own thinking, feeling, and acting.[149]

The BA principle is thus guided by the goal of lucidly making sense of our experience. From here he argues for the non-reducible reality of certain distinctively ethical concepts:

> what does it mean 'not to be able' to do without a term in, say, my deliberations about what to do? I mean that this term is indispensable to (what now appears to me to be) the clearest, most insightful statement of the issues before me. If I were denied this term, I wouldn't be able to deliberate as effectively, to focus the issue properly—as, indeed, I may feel (and we frequently do) that I was less capable of doing in the past, before I acquired this term. Now 'dignity', or 'courage', or 'brutality' may be indispensable terms for me, in that I cannot do without them in assessing possible courses of actions, or in judging the people or situations around me, or in determining how I really feel about some person's actions or way of being…this kind of indispensability of a term in a non-explanatory context of life can't just be declared irrelevant to the project to do without that term in an explanatory reduction. The widespread assumption that it can comes from a premises buried deep in the naturalist way of thinking, viz., that the terms of everyday life, those in which we go about living our lives, are to be relegated to the realm of mere appearance.[150]

Taylor continues:

---

[146] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 58.
[147] Rainer Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism*, trans. John M. M. Farrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 223.
[148] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.
[149] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 57, italics mine.
[150] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 57.

> What we need to *explain* is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn't fit some model of 'science' and that we know a priori that human beings must be explainable in this 'science. This begs the question. How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory *until* we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?[151]

He concludes,

> 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 trumps. Let me call this the BA principle.[152]

The Best Account Principle thus articulates in the moral realm what the self-interpreting animals thesis articulates more broadly. Both arguments stake out a bold claim for the reality of human meanings, including "moral meanings,"[153] in virtue of the need to use these terms in order to understand some dimension of the world—namely, human beings. Taylor writes, "the world of human affairs has to be described and explained in terms which take account of the meanings things have for us. And then we will naturally, and rightly, let our ontology be determined by the best account we can arrive at in these terms."[154]

Taylor's treatment of naturalism is contentious. While some of his readers are happy embrace his critique (and indeed aim to extend his critique even further),[155] a great number remain dissatisfied.[156] Richard Rorty complains that Taylor ignores "the possibility of a *non*-reductive

---

[151] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.
[152] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.
[153] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 9.
[154] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 69.
[155] For an extension of Taylor's critique to recent work in neo-Aristotelian variants of ethical naturalism see David MacPherson, "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 627-654.
[156] For a defense ethical naturalism *contra* Taylor see Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 136-161. He concludes that "nothing beyond the natural is required to make sense of ethics…But proponents of ethical naturalism are not thereby committed to metaphysical naturalism. Their claim is merely that ethical commitments are not undermined if there is nothing

naturalism."[157] Bernard Williams suggests that Taylor misframes the debate over naturalism. The

issue dividing naturalists and non-naturalists, at least in ethics, isn't primarily a matter of "mechanistic

reductionism, an attempt to represent ethical thought in terms supposedly appropriate to the natural

sciences."[158] Rather, the point is about how the ethical fits in with other non-ethical dimensions of

life. In Williams's words, "What is in question is not the reduction of the human to the non-human,

but the placing of the ethical among human motives."[159] In a related vein, Clifford Geertz criticizes

Taylor for working with an outdated conception of natural science more suited to the early modern

period than the complex reality of contemporary scientific research.[160] He describes Taylor's

conception of natural science as "generically characterized and temporally frozen."[161] The resulting

chasm between the *Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften*, according to Geertz, impedes our proper

understanding of both. The common idea behind these worries is that Taylor's preoccupation with

the reductionist impulse to eliminate any trace of human subjectivity from reality misses the point of

what is really at stake in naturalistic enterprises.

At issue between Taylor and his naturalistic critics is, at one level, how to understand

'naturalism,' an intellectual thicket of a debate springing from a surfeit of often-confused meanings

associated with 'naturalism.'[162] As Barry Stroud has remarked, "The idea of 'nature,' or 'natural'

objects or relations, or modes of investigation that are 'naturalistic,' has been applied more widely, at

---

beyond the naturalist ontology. An ethical naturalist may well have other reasons for accepting any of a variety of nonnatural entities, from Platonic Forms to the Christian God" (159-160).

[157] Richard Rorty, "Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude," *Philosophy ad Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 197, italics in original.

[158] Bernard Williams, "Replies," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 204. Also see Bernard Williams "Republican and Galilean," *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 17 (November 8, 1990): 45-47, www.nybooks.com/articles/3461.

[159] Williams, "Replies" 204.

[160] Clifford Geertz, "The Strange Estrangement: Charles Taylor and the Natural Sciences," in *Available Light: Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 143-159. In response to Geertz's criticism Taylor admits that we must view science more complexly than he often characterizes it, but he holds firm to some version of the *Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften*. See Charles Taylor, "Reply and Re-Articulation" in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, eds. James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 233-236.

[161] Geertz, "The Strange Estrangement: Charles Taylor and the Natural Sciences," 144.

[162] For a long list of the various meanings of 'naturalism' see Owen Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 430-431.

more different times and places, and for more different purposes than probably any other notion in the whole history of human thought."[163] Taylor's target is one of the common meanings of the term. This version, which Stroud calls "ridiculously extreme" naturalism, amounts to the claim that "the natural world is exhausted by all the physical facts. That is all and only what the natural world amounts to on this view; there is nothing else in nature."[164] Or, as Akeel Bilgami puts it, "naturalism" refers to "the metaphysical claim that there is nothing in the world that is not countenanced by the methods of natural science."[165]

'Naturalism,' however, can also have a softer, more humane meaning. This is the common ground shared by Rorty, Williams, and Geertz's criticisms of Taylor. The issue taken up by many contemporary thinkers is how to articulate this moderate version of naturalism without slipping back into reductionism, on the one hand, or rendering the term so broadly it ceases to be useful, on the other.[166] Many contemporary thinkers have taken up the task of articulating a version of naturalism friendly to things like human agency, value, and normativity—a concern at the heart of Taylor's work—without slipping into a form of supernaturalism.[167]

John McDowell offers perhaps the most well known story in this genre of moderate naturalism. His task is to show how "the space of reasons," a term he takes from Wilfrid Sellars to

---

[163] Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," in *Naturalism in Question*, eds. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 21. Cf. Ernst Nagel's remark, "The number of distinguishable doctrines for which the word 'naturalism' has been a counter in the history of thought is notorious." Quoted in Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 1.

[164] Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 27.

[165] Akeel Bilgami, "The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay," in *Naturalism and Normativity,* eds. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 23.

[166] Mario de Caro and Alberto Voltolini have stated the dilemma clearly as follows: "If Liberal Naturalism grants that the most philosophically controversial items (things, properties, and events that prima facie appear to be beyond nature) are reducible to or are ontologically dependent on the entities accountable by science, then this view is not liberal enough to be distinguished from Scientific Naturalism. If, on the other hand, Liberal Naturalism denies that possibility for at least some of the aforementioned items, then, by being *too* liberal it loses its naturalistic credentials and cannot be accepted by the philosophers who are committed to taking the scientific view of the world seriously." Mario De Caro and Alberto Voltolini, "Is Liberal Naturalism Possible?" in *Naturalism and Normativity,* eds. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 69. Barry Stroud makes a similar point in observing two competing pressures at work on naturalist accounts—a pressure towards exclusion and a pressure towards inclusion: "There is pressure on the one hand to include more and more within your conception of 'nature,' so it loses its definiteness and restrictiveness. Or, if the conception is kept fixed and restrictive, there is pressure on the other hand to distort or even to deny the very phenomena that a naturalistic study—and especially a naturalistic study of human beings—is supposed to explain." Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 22.

[167] The fear of supernaturalism is discussed in greater detail in § 2.5 of this chapter.

designate the normative meanings, reasons, and justifications essential to our everyday human

understanding of the world, fits with our modern conception of the natural world as governed by

natural laws without reducing reasons to natural laws.[168] His strategy is to conceive of nature in such

a way that resists the kind of reductionism that assimilates all of nature to a "realm of law"—a

position McDowell calls "bald naturalism"—without at the same time retreating to "a rampant

Platonism" that recognizes a realm of reasons and meaning untethered to the natural world, i.e., a

form of supernaturalism.[169] By enriching our conception of nature to include the irreducibility of

human concept use, what he calls "second nature," he hopes to have articulated a moderate

conception of naturalism that can also grant legitimacy to the human perspective, a fully naturalized

"space of reasons" that isn't cashed out in terms of natural laws.[170] On this view of naturalism there

is thus nothing uncanny about human meanings—the kind normative thing used in and

indispensable to reasoning—and no need to exile them to the wastelands of unreal. McDowell's

central contention is that both the "space of reasons" and the "realm of law" belong to nature, even

though they cannot be spelled out in terms of each other. In so doing McDowell charts out an

intellectual course for a moderate or, in his words, "liberal naturalism."[171]

Owen Flanagan's work provides another example of moderate naturalism at its best. He

attempts to show how the various "spaces of meaning," which include the domains of "art, science,

technology, ethics, politics spirituality," fit unproblematically into a naturalistic view of the world.[172]

The reductionist version of naturalism holds that ultimately only casual explanations latch on to the

real. But this rests on, according to Flanagan, a deeply problematic assumption. As Flanagan puts it,

"Even if everything that there is is the way it is because of some set of causes made it that way, it

---

[168] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), Lecture IV, § 3. See also John McDowell, "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind," in *Naturalism in Question*, 91-105. The phrase "space of reasons" originally comes from Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* [1956], ed. Robert Brandom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 76.

[169] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), Lecture IV, §§ 4-6.

[170] See John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism" in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), 167-197; McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture IV, § 7.

[171] This terminology comes from McDowell, "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind," § 3.

[172] Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), chapter 1, quotation from p. 7.

does not follow that the only real relation or the only interesting relation is the causal one."[173] What

the reductive naturalist misses is the idea that "there are plural ways of making sense of things and

finding meaning. This is because there are in reality a multiplicity of kinds of things (kings and

cabbages and numbers) and relations. Different spaces are suited to speak most profitably about

different relations."[174] Flanagan's point broadens our conception of the 'natural' without introducing

anything supernatural into the picture: "There is nothing spooky about there being more relations

that are real, and that matter, than relations that are causal. Furthermore, we are good at tracking all

the latter relations, and doing so helps us to make sense of things and find meaning."[175] Thus,

Flanagan concludes, "The scientific image, if conceived carefully, need not be reductive, eliminativist,

or disenchanting."[176]

McDowell, Flanagan and Taylor share a dissatisfaction with explaining everything in terms

of causal relations investigated by natural science.[177] To this extent they embrace what Hilary Putnam

calls "conceptual pluralism," which amounts to "the denial that any one language game is adequate

for all our cognitive purposes."[178] More specifically, Putnam elaborates the idea as follows:

> The heart of my own conceptual pluralism is the insistence that the various sorts of
> statements that are regarded as less than fully rational discourse, as somehow of merely
> 'heuristic' significance, by one or another of the 'naturalists' (whether these be ethical
> statements or statements about meaning and reference, or counterfactuals and statements
> about causality, or mathematical statements or whatever) are bona fide statements, 'as fully
> governed by norms of truth and validity as any other statements,' as James Conant has put
> it.[179]

In other words, the idea is that we should not assume that all of our ways of talking need to be

reducible to a common idiom in order to be intellectually credible. Indeed, it has been argued that the

reducibility of all natural scientific languages to a common baseline language is not only implausible,

---

[173] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem,* 13.

[174] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem,* 13.

[175] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem,* 14.

[176] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem,* 36.

[177] In addition to McDowell and Flanagan, also see Barry Stroud's defense of what he calls "expansive naturalism." He writes, ""What I am calling more open-minded or expansive naturalism says we must accept everything we find ourselves committed to in accounting for everything that we agree is so and want to explain." See Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 33-35, quotation from p. 34.

[178] Hilary Putnam, "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism,'" in *Naturalism in Question*, eds. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 61.

[179] Putnam. "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism,'" 61.

not only unnecessary, but even a comforting piece of "mythology" that flies in the face of empirical results.[180] The point of evoking Putnam's notion of "conceptual pluralism" is to say we need not assume that we can unify all of our intelligible modes of describing the world: "The whole idea that the world dictates a unique 'true' way of dividing the world into objects, situations, properties, etc., is a piece of parochialism."[181] Taylor's "self-interpreting animals" thesis can be seen as belonging to this family of moderate naturalist views in this sense.

The above discussion has attempted to place Taylor's critique of naturalism against a broader view of naturalism, specifically some of the internal debates within that philosophical camp. This has shown, I hope, the limitations of Taylor's critique and, at least partially, vindicated the Rorty-Williams-Geertz line of criticism against him. The point is that any serious treatment of naturalism today must jettison the assumption that naturalism is necessarily a "bald naturalism." Seen the from perspective of recent attempts to articulate a moderate naturalism, Taylor's critique of naturalism may look more like a historical artifact of recent analytic philosophy with nothing special to contribute. Indeed, it may seem to be just another attempt to stake out a middle position between a naturalism inherently hostile to the human perspective and a return to a supernatural world of demons and divinities. If this is so, does Taylor's critique of naturalism still matter? Does it still have something to contribute to a conversation that seemingly has moved beyond the earlier reductive forms of naturalism? This is particularly pertinent to discussion of 'articulacy' because if he develops this notion against a foil that overlooks the complex internal debates of broadly naturalistic philosophers, the concept of 'articulacy' itself would seem to be implicated in simple-mindedness. How can we expect 'moral articulacy' to amount to something interesting if it is juxtaposed to a strawperson?

---

[180] See John Dupré, "The Miracle of Monism," *Naturalism in Question*, ed. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 36-58. In contrast, Dupré defends what he calls "pluralistic naturalism," (p. 56-7) which doesn't require that our various natural scientific investigations are reducible to a common explanatory language. As Putnam observes, however, it isn't the irreducibility of one science to another that bothers the 'naturalist.' Rather, it the normative that causes the problems: "The very fact that no 'naturalist' philosopher thinks that *geology* is 'occult,' even though the predicates used in geology cannot be reductively defined in the language of fundamental physics, gives the show away…The fact is that naturalists regularly assume that if the normative cannot be eliminated or reduced to the nonnormative, then some 'occult' realm of Values must be postulated…to the extent that the appeal of 'naturalism' is based on fear, the fear in question seems to be a horror of the normative." Putnam. "The Content and Appeal of 'Naturalism,'" 70.

[181] Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 51.

Despite the advances in the debates surrounding naturalism, I want to argue that Taylor's position continues to be relevant, and it is the notion of 'articulacy' that most clearly represents his lasting contribution to the debate. Two main points bring out the significance of Taylor's position. First, Taylor offers a *unique counter picture* to reductionist naturalism. While Taylor joins other moderate naturalists in rejecting the absorption of the human standpoint into a homogenous, mechanized nature, his strategy attributes to the agent's standpoint a uniquely *hermeneutical structure,* which is missing in the accounts of fellow analytic critics of reductive naturalism. Here we find the concept of articulation hard at work because it is, as we shall see, a special mode of self-interpretation. Second, even though Taylor's critique of naturalism doesn't depend on or entail any supernatural commitments, the resulting point of view remains *open to the supernatural* in a peculiar way—namely, as an *articulation* of our moral sentiments.[182] The latitudinarianism of his position sets him apart from other moderate naturalists. I want to stress, however, that Taylor's position doesn't entail a supernaturalistic position, but it doesn't rule it out. It is quite important to pinpoint exactly when and how the supernatural arrives on the scene in his work. Given the role that articulation plays in both of these differences, we might say that what these other moderate naturalisms lack is precisely an awareness of articulation.

## 2.2 Emotions, Imports, and Articulation

Taylor's essay "Self-Interpreting Animals" clearly spells out his hermeneutical conception of moral agency in opposition to reductive or, to borrow John McDowell's term, "bald naturalism."[183]

---

[182] For another reading of Taylor that stresses his "openness" to religion see Michael L. Morgan, "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), 49-66; for a critical discussion of just how much "openness" Taylor's account allows see Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), chapters 6 and 7.

[183] Taylor is not the only thinker who challenges "bald naturalism" on the grounds that it fails to make sense of human agency. In this connection see also, for instance, Bilgami, "The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay." The issue remains *where exactly* to locate the tension between the two point of view of human agency and that of natural science. In the Anglo-American tradition Taylor's argument stands out for its uniquely hermeneutical character.

A curious feature of his account of agency is that it opens with a theory of feeling and emotion.[184] This starting-point, I want to argue, is hardly incidental to his account, but rather it plays, as we shall see, an integral role in his conception of human agency, morality, and practical reason. Above all, the emotions are an indispensable reference point for understanding articulation. Taylor sees our feelings as being our fundamental link to the world of value and meaning. We have "inner depths," and these can be articulated.[185] Our emotions provide a route into the world of significances, i.e., those things, whatever they are, that matter to us. As we shall see, the emotions play an indispensable role in both constituting the standpoint of human meaning and providing a conceptual landscape for Taylor's conception of articulation.

Taylor begins his theory of emotions by linking emotions to judgments, a familiar move within the theory of emotions. He observes, "many of our feelings, emotions, desires, in short much of our experienced motivation, are such that saying properly what they are like involves expressing, or making explicit a judgment about the object they bear on."[186] In other words, making sense of the emotions requires making sense of the beliefs that support those emotions. On Taylor's account emotions have what are commonly called intentional objects, i.e., "emotions are essentially related to certain objects."[187] Even *Angst*, which seemingly isn't related to an object at all, has, Taylor argues, an "empty slot" that gives it its distinctive character, and this reveals the essential relation to an object that is internal to emotion.[188] We are annoyed by the unreliability of a friend or anxious about the

---

[184] Taylor, unlike some theorists of emotion, makes no distinction between feelings and emotions. Compare to Robert Solomon who notes, "in one sense, it is perfectly plausible to insist that emotions are feelings, in the sense that they are typically experienced…But there is another sense, easily conflated with the first, that feelings are essentially unintelligent sensations, or much like sensations, even if these are not physically localized (like a pain, for example), or indicative of the physical appetites (like hunger, for instance)." See Robert Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 15. The term 'feeling' has many senses. These are analyzed with sensitivity in Gilbert Ryle, "Feelings," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (April 1951): 193-205.

[185] He writes, "The sense of depth in inner space is bound up with the sense that we can move into it and bring things to the fore. This we do when we articulate. The inescapable feeling of depth comes from the realization that whatever we bring up, there is always more down there. Depth lies in there being always, inescapably, something beyond our articulative power. This notion of inner depths is therefore intrinsically linked to our understanding of ourselves as expressive, as articulating an inner source." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 390.

[186] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 47.

[187] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 47.

[188] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 48.

results of a medical test. These feelings are directed at things. Our emotions relate to persons, events, and things in our world and necessarily bring into play judgments regarding those various intentional objects.

Taylor joins the so-called "cognitivist" theorists of emotion in bringing into play not just judgments of any garden-variety but rather value-infused judgments. Robert Solomon boldly states the defining thesis of "cognitivist" accounts of the emotions in writing, "emotions are *evaluative* judgments."[189] Martha Nussbaum moderates the claim in holding that "Emotions…involve judgments about important things, judgments in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control."[190] Similarly, Taylor stresses that our emotions embody evaluations of our situation. This pits Taylor's account against the line of emotions theorizing indebted to Williams James that see emotions as most fundamentally non-judgmental but rather our awareness of physiological changes.[191] Indeed, given Taylor's aim of setting limits to the expansion of naturalistic accounts that attempt to explain human experience from a third person, objectified standpoint, his alliance with the cognitivists should come as no surprise. Taylor wants to emphasize the importance of the distinctiveness of the agent's first-personal standpoint, and emotional experience provides a spot for staking out that claim.

It is essential to Taylor's account that the emotions are disclosive. In his words, "They are affective modes of awareness of situation."[192] Our emotions reveal a value-laden world. This is not to say that all of our values are ultimately traced back to the emotions in either the sense that the emotions are the ultimate source of value or that all human values are reflected in emotional experience. The point is rather that our emotions enrich the world of values beyond its otherwise

---

[189] Solomon, *True to Our Feelings*, 204.
[190] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 19.
[191] For the *locus classicus* of this line of interpreting emotions see William James, "What is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9 (April 1884): 188-205. For a sophisticated, contemporary version of the Jamesian approach see Jesse Prinz, "Emotions Embodied" in *Thinking about Feeling*, ed. Robert Solomon (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), chapter 3.
[192] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 48.

existing stock. In order to describe this phenomenon Taylor introduces the notion of an "import," which expresses how "something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject; or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject."[193] Imports are a species of "anthropocentric property" mentioned above. They say how something in an agent's world relates to her set of concerns. Our emotions fuse together two fundamental relationships: (a) our beliefs about our situation and (b) how those things that matter to us. In this way imports link an agent to her world at a fundamental level. Arto Laitnen has expressed the thought well: "Interpreting one's own emotions is at the same time a matter of interpreting one's situations so *self*-interpreting animals are actually *world*-interpreting animals: they try to grasp the evaluative aspects of the lifeworld, and get them right."[194] The concept of an import is crucial in the formation of a moral world. The emotions connect an agent's subjective set of concerns and a sense of value inhering in other persons and things in our world. Emotions, as Martha Nussbaum has eloquently put it, "insist on the real importance of their object, but they also embody the person's own commitment to the object as a part of her scheme of ends. This is why, in the negative cases, they are felt as tearing the self apart: because they have to do with me and my own, my plans and goals, what is important in my own conception (or more inchoate sense) of what it is for me to live well."[195] Our emotional reactions to imports capture at a basic level how moral agents can be invested in and emotionally tied to a moral world.

For Taylor the emotions disclose a moral world to us in the strong sense that they open up a domain of meanings that would otherwise be closed to us. Our awareness of the world through our emotions provides a unique mode of grasping the meaning and significance of events in our lives. Taylor's claim is not just that emotions provide us *a way into* a whole range of meanings that bear on what matters to us and who we are as agents. Rather he is making the stronger claim that our emotional lives play *a necessary role* in making us aware of at least some meanings. He writes:

---

[193] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 48.
[194] Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources: On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 168.
[195] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 33.

> Now our direct, intuitive experience of import is through feeling. And thus feeling is our mode of access to this entire domain of subject-referring imports, of what matters to us *qua* subjects, or of what it is to be human. We may come to feel the force of some imports through having explained to us their relations to others, but these we must experience directly, through feeling. The chain of explanations must be anchored somewhere in our intuitive grasp of what is at stake.[196]

This is specifically true of our moral sentiments. In Taylor's words, "our deepest moral instincts" count as "our *mode of access* to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted."[197] These significances refer back to our self-understanding as agents, to a sphere of meanings and significances that cannot be completely explained in terms of "external criteria" like the survival or well-being of the human organism.[198] Some emotions like fear of an impending physical harm, e.g., a tiger attack (Taylor's example) can be so explained.[199] But *some* of our emotions could not be similarly explained by reference to our being a biological organism, but require the introduction of specifically human meanings in order to make sense. Taylor points to the way in which the emotion of shame is essentially tied up with certain cultural ideals available only at the level of personal experience, ideals that disappear when considered from within a (bald) naturalistic framework.[200] Taylor's account of emotions thus provides us with crucial details on how he sees the inner workings of the agent's standpoint.

Imports play an important role in expressing for Taylor the world-structure of an agent's moral experience by accounting for both the *normative* and *intersubjective* dimensions of the emotional life. Phenomenologically it is revealing, he observes, that we can sensibly assess the fittingness of our

---

[196] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 62. As Taylor has put it more recently, "Normally, *our sense that X is important ethically is inseparable from our feeling its importance*, from admiring those who follow it, for instance; or being inspired by it; or feeling relieved and grateful that this exists as a human possibility." Charles Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (January 2011): 11, italics mine.

[197] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8, italics mine.

[198] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 64.

[199] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 51-52.

[200] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 52-56. He writes, "Shame is an emotion that a subject experiences in relation to a dimension of his existence as a subject. What we can be ashamed of are properties which are essentially properties of a subject. This may not be immediately evident, because I may be ashamed of my shrill voice or my effeminate hands. But of course it only makes sense to see these as objects of shame if they have for me or my culture an expressive dimension: a shrill voice is (to me, to my culture) something unmanly, betokens hysteria, not something solid, strong, macho, self-contained. It does not radiate a sense of strength, capacity, superiority. Effeminate hands are—effeminate. Both voice and hands clash with what I aspire to be, feel that my dignity demands that I be, as a person, a presence among others" (53).

feelings to a situation. Imports are meant to express this feature of emotions: "In identifying the import of a given situation we are picking out what in the situation *gives the grounds or basis* of our feelings, or what could give such grounds, or perhaps should give such grounds, if we feel nothing or have inappropriate feelings."[201] This serves as the basis for distinguishing between two basic kinds of feelings and emotions: those open to normative assessment and those closed to it. He points to nausea as an instance of a feeling that cannot be wrongly or inconsistently experienced. Many other emotions, by contrast, are normative, i.e., we can assess them as warranted or unwarranted responses to a situation; "where someone reacts with moral disapproval, or indignation, we often feel justified in criticizing their reaction. This act was not really wrong; you are not justified in reacting to it with indignation. This act does not *merit* the reaction you have to it."[202] Taylor's phenomenological observation that we do in fact argue about whether emotional responses are appropriate to a situation, provides a basis for rational argument and intersubjective agreement regarding meanings that are not a part of the world described by natural science. The import structure of emotions thus expresses for Taylor the possibility of shared meanings, shared norms, and ultimately shared moral worlds.[203]

Talk of 'imports' is an example of the kind of "anthropocentric properties" menaced by "bald naturalism," i.e., a features of the world that purport to be "there" in the sense that they ought to be recognized by fellow humans but are invisible from the "absolute" perspective. Taylor cites the

---

[201] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 49, italics mine.

[202] See Charles Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 306, italics mine. Taylor originally makes this distinction in *Sources of the Self*, 6-8. Gary Gutting points out that there is one way in which feelings like nausea are still normatively governed. He writes, "Inconsistency…is a matter of the relation of two statements to one another…it is entirely possible for two different affective expressions to contradict one another, as is the case with 'This is nauseating' and 'This is delicious.'" Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 139. But this is still only within the context of an individual moral agent's experience. Taylor wants to mark a distinction between subjective feelings where what we feel is *just* what we feel and intersubjective feelings where there is an expectation others should feel the same way or that such a feeling is at least justified. For a competing, noncognitivist conception of the normativity of moral emotional reactions see Allan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990).

[203] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 6-8; compare to David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?" in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 185-211.

'humiliating' as an example of what he has in mind.[204] But these properties rest on deeper layers of interpretive judgment. We have to recognize a vast network of what we might call *sub-import relations* that form the necessary background for picking something out as 'humiliating' at all. Imports are, as it were, merely the surface of an elaborate and highly complex web or relations presupposed in our moral life. The agent's standpoint from within a world of meaning goes far deeper than the relatively higher-order judgments involving import-properties. Some of these sub-import relations will be themselves articulated and others will remain inarticulate. In Taylor's early presentation of the self-interpreting animals thesis this point isn't obvious, but it comes out in his later writings where he recognizes that understanding an import requires understanding its "evaluative point," and (following Bernard Williams and John McDowell) this "point" need not be expressible in terms of an explicit rule.[205] Indeed, as we shall analyze in the next chapter, these judgments necessarily presuppose what is often called "the background," a vast body of inarticulate understanding that makes it possible to make explicit judgments.[206]

Imports occupy a space that is not necessarily reflective. As Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, emotional experience is first and foremost a way of encountering the world around us—not a reflection on the fact of having an emotional experience. We encounter situations through emotion and only later can we come to reflect upon the character of the emotional experience itself. I can

---

[204] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 48. In describing 'imports' Taylor writes, "experiencing a given emotion involves experiencing our situation as being of a certain kind or having a certain property. But this property cannot be neutral, cannot be something to which we are indifferent, or else we would not be moved. Rather, experiencing an emotion is to be aware of our situation as humiliating, or shameful, or outrageous, or dismaying, or exhilarating, or wonderful; and so on."

[205] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 54. Here Taylor is following Bernard Williams, who is developing an idea from John McDowell. Williams writes, "How we 'go on' from one application of a concept to another is a function of the kind of interest that the concept represents, and we should not assume that we could see how people 'go on' if we did not share the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has its point. An insightful observer can indeed come to understand and anticipate the use of the concept without actually sharing the values of the people who use it…but in imaginatively anticipating the use of the concept, the observer also has to *grasp imaginatively its evaluative point*. He cannot stand quite outside the evaluative interests of the community he is observing, and pick up the concept simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world." Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 141-142. Italics mine. Also see John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason" *The Monist* 62 (July 1979): 331-350; John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 52 (1978), 13-29; John McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following" in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1981), 141-162.

[206] See chapter three where I discuss Taylor's theory of the "background" at length.

reflect on the fact that I am 'bored' but this is secondary to and derivative from the experience of an "attenuation of psychic vitality" or "a progressive diminution of significant differentiation within consciousness."[207] Sartre calls this the difference between "reflective" and "non-reflective" emotion.[208] Otherwise put, the characterization of how one feels adds something to the direct experience of feeling. Both reflective and non-reflective emotion are involved in Taylor's conception of articulation. We might say that articulation is the movement by which we go from a non-reflective emotional encounter with the world to a reflective understanding of both how we feel and a characterization of the world in such a way that the feeling we have makes sense.[209] The experience of imports is not necessarily the experience of reflecting on the feeling or on the import. Rather emotional experience is first and foremost the experience of the import-laden character of a situation. Later via reflection we can articulate the situation, i.e., highlight, put into words the salient aspects of it, and thereby express it. The notion of articulation thus comes into play as our capacity for the reflective characterization of our feelings, the imports that justify our feelings, and the interpretations presupposed by imports.

The import-relatedness of emotions brings into play layers of interpretation regarding one's situation and what matters to us, even if these remain implicit prior to our articulation. Taylor writes, "human life is never without interpreted feeling; the interpretation is constitutive of feeling."[210] We might say that emotion rests on the architecture of belief, albeit often submerged beliefs in that the import relationships that make sense of our emotions (and indeed the emotions themselves) are not always clear to us. But the terms that shape our emotion are open to change and thereby provide a means for changing our emotions themselves. Taylor writes, "certain feelings involve a certain level of articulation, in that the sense of things they incorporate requires the application of certain terms.

---

[207] These apt descriptions of the experience of boredom come from Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 54.

[208] Jean Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge, 1994), 34-39.

[209] Cf. Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 132-133.

[210] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 63,

But at the same time, they can admit of further articulation, in that the sense of things can yet be further clarified and made articulate."[211]

Articulation comes into play as the means by which we draw out and characterize the various judgments and import-relations embodied in our emotions.[212] Articulating our feelings, Taylor writes, "involves making explicit the sense of the situation they incorporate, making explicit some judgment about the situation which gives the emotion its character."[213] The point here is not just that our interpretation forms our feeling, but that these are open to a process of deepening, enrichment, and refinement. As Taylor notes, "we can sometimes *go deeper into our feelings*, make more articulate what is involved in our desires, if we can *express the imports which underlie them and give them their point*."[214] Given the connection between feeling and imports, articulation has a broad character. We articulate our feelings by articulating the world around us and we articulate the world around us by articulating our feelings. That is to say, articulation occurs at the juncture point of an agent and her world.

Articulation is a dynamic process whereby we not only express our feelings but also shape them. He writes:

> our feelings incorporate a certain articulation of our situation, that is, they presuppose that we characterize our situation in certain terms. But at the same time they admit of—and very often feel that they call for—further articulation, the elaboration of finer terms permitting more penetrating characterization. And this further articulation can in turn transform the feelings.[215]

The power of articulation and re-articulation to change our emotions rests on the constitutive relationship between our feelings and our self-/world-descriptions. Taylor's point is that our

---

[211] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 63.
[212] Robert Solomon makes the related observation that our emotions rest, as it were, on layers of judgment on judgment. See Solomon, *True to Our Feelings*, chapter 18, especially 212-215. For a sophisticated and related position also see Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, chapter 1.
[213] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 48.
[214] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 56.
[215] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 63-4. Again, he writes, "certain feelings involve a certain level of articulation, in that the sense of things they incorporate requires the application of certain terms. But at the same time, they can admit of further articulation, in that the sense of things can yet be further clarified and made articulate." (63)

interpretations *constitute* in some sense how we feel.[216] We will explore how this works in greater detail in our discussion of Taylor's philosophy of language in the next chapter.

It is important to point out that the constituting power of articulation for Taylor is always only partial. Our interpretations encounter resistance of two forms. The first kind of pushback comes from our feelings and the imports undergirding them. Taylor writes:

> That description and experience are bound together in this constitutive relation admits of causal influences in both directions: it can sometimes allow us to alter experience by coming to *fresh insight*; but more fundamentally it circumscribes insight through the deeply *embedded shape of experience* for us.[217]

Taylor's conception of articulation is thus of a back and forth push between our self-interpretation, which is a world-interpretation, and experience that resists, challenges, and disrupts that characterization leading to re-articulation. This focus is particularly prominent in Taylor's early writings where he characterizes interpretation being responsible to something: "an articulation purports to characterize a feeling; it is meant to be faithful to what it is that moves us. There is a getting it right and getting it wrong in this domain. Articulations are like interpretations in that they are attempts to make clearer the imports things have for us."[218] The "getting it right" here seems to refer not to making the right decision but more fundamentally properly describing what moves us. Elsewhere he notes, "Our attempts to formulate what we hold important must, like descriptions, strive to be faithful to something. But what they strive to be faithful to is not an independent object with a fixed degree and manner of evidence, but rather a *largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance*."[219] In short, in virtue of being *of something*, our articulations encounter an in-built limitation.

In contrast to the first kind of pushback located in the individual's experience of the important, the second kind of pushback is social. In Taylor's later writings, notably *Sources*, the *intersubjective* resistance to our interpretations comes to the fore. Language makes possible, in Taylor's

---

[216] For a probing discussion of how interpretations can be constitutive of feelings and selves see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), chapter 2.
[217] Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language*, 37, italics mine.
[218] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 64-5.
[219] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 38.

words, "a common vantage point from which we survey the world together."[220] It is in public

language(s) that we express and argue about what matters. Not all of our feelings are "brute" in the

sense that they just happen to us; some are of the kind that we think are warranted or not warranted,

appropriate or inappropriate.[221] Thus an individual's descriptions of situations, her responses, and the

justifications of those responses are open to public scrutiny, challenge, and contestation. And this

public character of our self-understanding runs deep. Our very self-conceptions, which we have

already seen are linked to our understanding of our world, are made possible by our involvement in

what Taylor calls "webs of interlocution."[222] The point is that a condition for the possibility of me

articulating myself is that I have the linguistic resources made possible by membership in a linguistic

community.[223] But this entails that my articulations must be shareable with at least some others.[224]


## 2.3 Naturalism and Procedural Moral Theory

Taylor's critique of naturalism not only forms the backdrop for understanding his notion of

articulation, but it also has implications for how we think of modern moral philosophy. In this

section I want to clarify the role that Taylor thinks naturalism plays in the contraction of the 'moral'

to the exclusion of the good, and how naturalism (both bald and moderate) stands in relation to what

he calls "procedural"[225] moral theories. A full examination of Taylor's critique of naturalism is

beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, I will focus specifically on that dimension that bears on the

---

[220] Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning" in *Human Agency and Language,* 259
[221] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 6-8; Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," 305-306.
[222] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 36.
[223] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2.
[224] As Taylor writes, "A human being can always be original, can step beyond the limits of thought and vision of contemporaries, can even be quite misunderstood by them. But the drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 37.
[225] For this terminology see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 85-86; Charles Taylor, "The Motivation Behind a Procedural Ethics," in *Kant and Political Philosophy*, ed., Ronald Beiner and William James Booth (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 337-360. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4 of this thesis.

*proceduralization of moral thinking*, i.e., the production of the kind of moral theories aspiring to decision procedures.[226]

At the outset, we should note the complexity of Taylor's motivational analysis of modern moral philosophy. Far from presenting a one-dimensional, singular-strand connection between naturalism and procedural moral theories, he presents a motivationally complex picture of various forces coming to bear on our moral thinking. Besides naturalism, he points to the rise of individual freedom, what he calls "the affirmation of the ordinary life" emerging in the Reformation, and the appeal of "disengaged rationality" as drivers behind modern morality.[227] The confluence of these streams of thought work together to make broader conceptions of ethics, those that present a view of the good, seem "intellectually suspect and morally sinister" for both moral and epistemological reasons.[228] Nevertheless, Taylor's subtle account still assigns great responsibility for our present woes to the deleterious influence of naturalism on ethical thought.

So what kind of connection does Taylor envisage between naturalism and procedural moral theory? How does naturalism contribute to the contraction of moral thinking? His argument, as best I can tell, runs something like this. It begins with a meta-level account of what good reasoning looks like, an account that is ill fitted to moral thinking. Taylor writes:

> The distortive effect comes in that we tend to start formulating our meta-theory of a given domain with an already formed model of valid reasoning, all the more dogmatically held because we are oblivious to the alternatives. This model then makes us quite incapable of seeing how reason does and can really function in the domain, to the degree that it does not fit the model. We cut and chop the reality of, in this case, ethical thought to fit the Procrustean bed of our model of validation. Then, since meta-theory and theory cannot be isolated from each other, the distortive conception begins to shape our ethical thought itself.[229]

---

[226] For his broader critique of naturalism, especially with regard to evolutionary theory, see Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology." This line of argument is taken up and developed in MacPherson, "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism."

[227] For the most detailed account of the historical lines of thought behind proceduralism see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, sections II-V. For a more condensed version see Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 60-65; Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 5-10. This is, in his words, a kind of "genealogy" whereby he uncovers the historical roots of our contemporary ethical inarticulacy. See Taylor, "A most peculiar institution," 151.

[228] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 144.

[229] Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 230-231.

Taylor locates the false model of thinking in the natural sciences, which, as we saw above, distances itself completely from "anthropocentric properties" in the pursuit of an "absolute" account. The idea is that the natural sciences employ criteria independent of human sensibilities whereas moral reflection essentially requires the use of sensibilities from a human perspective. The standard of clear, rigorous thinking found in the natural sciences gets inappropriately carried over to moral philosophy causing us to distance ourselves from appeal to our moral reactions in moral thinking. As Taylor puts it,

> our understanding has been clouded by a naturalist epistemology and its focus on the natural science model. Because following the argument in favour of a theory in natural science requires that we neutralize our own anthropocentric reactions, we too easily conclude that arguments in the domain of practical reason ought not to rely on our spontaneous moral reactions. We ought to be able to convince people who share absolutely none of our basic moral intuitions of the justice of our cause, or else practical reason is of no avail.[230]

This observation leads Taylor to introduce a distinction between theories that stand *external* to our moral reactions and those that start *internal* to them. The key distinguishing feature is whether we try to do moral theory without reference to human moral emotions or whether we start with and from our moral reactions and refine them in light of one another. The problem with modeling practical reasoning on the natural sciences, he thinks, is that it seduces us into thinking that we must appeal to bases outside of and independent from our moral reactions. Good reasons, this theory leads us to believe, will appeal to moral agents regardless of their moral reactions in virtue of their rationality alone. He writes,

> As long as the wrong, external model of practical reason holds sway, the very notion of giving a reason smacks of offering some external considerations not anchored in our moral intuitions, which can somehow show that certain moral practices and allegiances are correct. An external consideration in this sense is one which could convince someone who was quite unmoved by a certain vision of the good that he ought to adopt it, or at least act according to its prescriptions.[231]

Given the tight link between emotion and interpretation discussed above, Taylor sees external theories as disconnecting us from the true roots of our ethical thinking. These are motivated by the desire to escape from the messy process of moral interpretation. As a consequence, moral theorists

---

[230] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 71-2; on this point see also Taylor, 'The Diversity of Goods," 230-247.
[231] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 75.

are seduced into identifying good practical reasons with either logical consistency (roughly Kantianism) or maximization (roughly Utilitarianism).[232] The link between naturalism and procedural moral theory, on Taylor's reading, has to do with a standard for knowledge set by the natural sciences, a standard that an interpretive activity rooted in moral feelings (articulation) cannot meet. Consequently, theorists are led to adopt an austere conception of practical reasoning that brackets our moral emotions and the interpretive issues that go along with them.

What implication does this have for moral theory? Here we intersect the well-known debate within contemporary moral philosophy concerning the proper role for moral intuitions in moral reflection. Kwame Anthony Appiah has aptly called this the "intuition problem."[233] The issue here is what place our moral reactions play in the construction of an overall moral viewpoint or theory. We confront, as he frames it, two unattractive positions: "In one direction we complain of normative systems that seem impossibly unmoored from human judgment, bicycles built for octopods…In the other direction, though, we get the bugbear of moral conservativism, propping up the disreputable old theories that our intuitions enrobe."[234] No theorist, to my knowledge, advocates the first option of simply sticking with our existing moral intuitions. But several notable philosophers opt for the second, austere approach. These thinkers call for us to suspend our moral intuitions altogether in the construction of moral theories. They view all moral intuitions with the utmost suspicion. Richard Brandt, for instance, counts working within our moral intuitions as nothing more than "a re-shuffling of moral prejudices."[235] Similarly, R.M. Hare admits the use of moral intuitions only in everyday decision-making (what he calls the intuitive level) while denying them any role in theory construction

---

[232] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 231. He writes, "Formalisms, like utilitarianism, have the apparent value that they would allow us to ignore the problematic distinctions between different qualities of action or modes of life, which play a large part in our actual moral decisions, feelings of admiration, remorse, etc., but which are so hard to justify when others controvert them. They offer the hope of deciding ethical questions without having to determine which of a number of rival languages of moral virtue and vice, of the admirable and contemptible, of unconditional versus conditional obligation, are valid."

[233] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 77.

[234] Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 76-77.

[235] Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 22.

(what he calls the critical level).[236] According to Hare, introducing them into philosophical reflection on morals would be "a pernicious error" that would "wreck the entire enterprise" of clarifying moral thinking.[237] The reason is that it vitiates the neutrality of moral theory that supposedly comes from basing moral thinking merely on the study of the logic of moral language.[238] To Hare's mind starting from moral intuitions transforms moral reflection into "a viciously circular procedure" that backs prejudice with more prejudice.[239] The only solution, he thinks, is to find an extra-moral foundation for moral theory, a grounding he claims to find in the logic of our moral language.[240]

The importance of this strand of austere theory, from a Taylorian perspective, is that it demonstrates what moral thinking becomes when it has fully absorbed an ideal of reason ill suited for the moral life—namely, one loosely modeled on the natural sciences, one distrustful of moral emotions and interpretation. Much of Taylor's argument, as we shall see, is articulating the moral life in such a way that shows the mismatch between this conception of reason imported from the natural sciences and the kind of reasoning that must take place if we are to be morally articulate, i.e., reasoning grounded in the moral meanings constituting our world. Here we can see the point in Taylor's argument where naturalist and proceduralist reductions merge. The naturalist model makes us suspicious of our ethical reactions, so moral thinking retreats to finding a ground utterly outside of our moral reactions. By misapplying a certain ideal of reasoning, such contemporary theorists close

---

[236] See R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), chapters 2 and 3. Hare's position will be discussed at greater length in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

[237] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, § 1.3, quote from p. 11. Elsewhere Hare writes, "To introduce substantial moral intuitions at the critical level would be to incorporate in critical thinking the very same weakness which it was designed to remedy." (*Moral Thinking*, 40)

[238] See Hare, *Moral Thinking*, chapters 2 and 3.As Bernard Williams has aptly described this connection in Hare's thinking: "moral philosophy can make a difference only because it has authority, and it can have authority only because of its neutral status as a logical or linguistic subject." Bernard Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A.W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 83. My account has benefited from Williams astute reconstruction of the key moves in Hare's thinking. This was originally published in *Hare and Critics: Essays in Moral Thinking*, eds. Douglas Seanor and Nick Fotion (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).

[239] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 40.

[240] See Hare, *Moral Thinking*, especially chapters 5-7.

off a middle space of reflection that occurs from within the standpoint of human meanings.[241] This is

the hermeneutically structured space of moral interpretation advocated by Taylor.

In contrast to thinkers like Hare and Brandt who seek to ground our conception of morality

on something external to the moral meanings and reactions that constitute our moral experience,

Taylor sees morality as essentially bound up with and internal to human self-interpretations. We

cannot but start with our moral intuitions. The alternative, Taylor claims, is to do something other

than *ethical* reflection. He writes, "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*."[242]

Otherwise put, we must proceed from within the standpoint of moral agents with substantive ethical

beliefs. Taylor writes:

> 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.[243]

Taylor's point is that distinctively *moral* thinking is characterized by our moral intuitions. If we

bracket these, we are no longer talking about *morality*.[244] The adequate model for practical reasoning

in ethics is within our moral reactions/meanings, not without.

The idea that we need cannot escape from moral intuitions does not entail that those

intuitions are correct or in anyway immune from error. Taylor's position is not that our moral

intuitions are good as such or good as they are. Our moral reactions are notoriously fallible and open

to corruption. As Martha Nussbaum has remarked:

---

[241] Bernard Williams has made a similar point against Hare-style moral theorists. He writes, "it is quite wrong to think that the only alternative to ethical theory is to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice. Theory and prejudice are not the only possibilities for an intelligent agent, or for philosophy." Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 112.

[242] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 72, italics mine.

[243] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 73.

[244] Harry Frankfurt makes a parallel argument regarding normativity. His point is that if we take the normativity of morals to be grounded in something like logic, we can't make sense of the distinctive character of moral failings and the distinctive kind of anger they provoke. Thus certain theories of normativity effectively change the topic, i.e., we cease talking about morality. See Harry Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," *Autonomes Handeln: Beiträge zur Philosophie von Harry G. Frankfurt*, eds. Monika Betzler and Barbara Guckes (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), § 5.

if children learn that animals are brutes who do not suffer, they will be unlikely to feel compassion for the plight of animals raised for food in confining conditions. If members of a group believe that they ought to have rights and privileges less extensive than those of the dominant group, they will be slow to feel angry at their subordination."[245]

Recent work in empirical psychology confirms, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, "our intuitions are guided by irrelevant factors," and therefore "*can't* be reliable guides."[246] But these failings of moral intuitions need not rock Taylor's case for he isn't committed to the absurd position of affirming any and all moral intuitions. Our moral reactions often need to be challenged, but the basis for challenging proceeds from other intuitions: "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."[247] Moral philosophy, according to Taylor, must set out from our moral intuitions because that is the where the substance of the moral life is found—namely, within the tissue of meanings constituting the human world. This may require substantial modification. "Growth in moral insight," he tells us, "often requires that we neutralize some of our reactions. But this is in order that others may be identified unmixed and unscreened by petty jealousy, egoism, or other unworthy feelings. It is never a question of prescinding from our reactions altogether."[248]

---

[245] Martha Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 13.

[246] For a detailed survey of the recent literature and relevant citations see Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 82-92, quote from p. 85.

[247] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 75; Taylor's reference to "transitions" here refers to his idea that practical reasoning moves within our moral intuitions and the most general criteria is one of comparative lucidity. We will discuss Taylor's view of practical reason at greater length in chapter four. Also see Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reasoning" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), chapter 3.

[248] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8. As Taylor elaborates elsewhere, "Maybe we have reason to think that our reactions are coming out of something extraneous in us, that has no reason to be linked with a correct perception of *this* good. Thus my satisfaction with my reaction to some challenge may not come from a perception of its rightness, but from a more narcissistic fulfillment: that I like the image of myself responding, giving the stinging rebuke to wrong-doing, for instance, or standing up with integrity. We can come to liberate ourselves from these irrelevant reactions, and the truer perception of what's important that thereby emerges is all the more convincing, because it comes out of such an error-reducing move…Moral growth involves, among other things, a change in our emotional reactions to people, acts, predicaments, making these reactions more accurate and insightful. But this doesn't mean that the standards which we aim at in this process are—or even could be—set by an utterly disengaged form of rationality, such as might suffice to calculate utility consequences, or to check if a maxim could be coherently applied universally. The temptation to resort to such abstracted forms arises form the mistaken belief that our sentiments are brute, non-cognitive, uninformed by insight, whether accurate or not." Charles Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (January 2011): 12-13.

But the significance of Taylor's contribution is not simply the rejection of Hare-Brandt style austerity measures, a point he shares with other thinkers—notably, John McDowell and Bernard Williams.[249] Rather it lies in a counter conception of moral agency. Specifically, the uniqueness of Taylor's position turns on two points: (a) what moral intuitions *are* and (b) what we ought to *do* with them. Taylor describes a picture of human beings as animals to whom things of great significance are revealed, in part, through their emotions. These emotions, however, are not simply given but require interpretive work. This makes Taylor's view of 'moral intuitions' much richer than the standard conception. By 'moral intuitions' theorists normally mean, as Bernard Williams notes, a kind of belief, specifically, "spontaneous convictions, moderately reflective but not yet theorized, about the answer to some ethical question, usually hypothetical and couched in general terms."[250] Taylor's use of the term 'moral intuitions' to describe our starting point in ethical reflection means something richer, more nuanced than the standard meaning. For Taylor, moral intuitions are not simply untheorized beliefs but rather moral reactions rooted in our feelings and often quite murky and potentially unjustified. The point is that the intuition itself is the product of interpreting our moral reactions and refining them in the course of intersubjective dialogue. Both the emotional as well as the interpretive elements are suppressed on the common view of intuitions. Taylor's conception of humans as "self-interpreting animals" thus enriches his notion of what moral intuitions are.

Not all moral theorists are committed to the intellectual austerity measures implemented by Hare and Brandt. Indeed, several prominent theorists adopt a middle position between the two horns of the so-called "intuition problem." Michael Slote, for instance, advocates a conception of moral theory that straightens out our moral intuitions:

---

[249] McDowell urges that we must think of practical reflection along the lines provided by Neurath's famous boat analogy—namely, we must fix our craft while at sea. See McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," §§9-12; McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture IV, § 7. As Williams remarks, "reflective criticism should basically go in a direction opposite to that encouraged by ethical theory. Theory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons. But critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that, in the context of reflective discussion makes some sense and commands some loyalty." See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 116-117.

[250] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 93-94, quote from p. 94.

our ordinary intuitive moral thought is not just complex, but subject to paradox and internal incoherence, and this is a far less acceptable situation than what the antitheorists imagine to be the case. In fact, it is what makes moral theory both necessary and desirable…Our intuitions turn out to clash among themselves, and if we are to attain to full coherence in our ethical thinking, we are forced to reject at least some intuitions. But which ones? Well, to decide *that* issue, we need to look for a way of understanding ethics that allows us to avoid incoherence/paradox and that task requires us to be philosophically and morally *inventive*.[251]

John Rawls's "reflective equilibrium" approach to moral intuitions, which sees moral theory as the back-and-forth between what he calls "considered judgments" and more general moral principles, is the most famous approach of this kind.[252] Both theorists say we ought to start with our moral intuitions and clean them up, so to speak, a point with which Taylor too could agree. But the issue is *how* we clean them up. Here Rawls' position generates a system of moral principles resembling, even if problematically, a scientific theory.[253] The result of achieving reflective equilibrium may, he concedes, "involve principles and theoretical constructions which go much beyond the norms and standards cited in everyday life; it may eventually require fairly sophisticated mathematics as well."[254]

By contrast, Taylor's conception of articulation has a fundamentally different idea of what we do with moral intuitions once we agree that we have to start with them. We don't try to cram them into a system of relatively general principles. A potential mathematical model isn't in the cards. We certainly won't, on his view, arrive at a decision procedure. This would still be letting a false model dictate the terms of our ethical reflection. Taylor's model, instead, adopts a thoroughly hermeneutical strategy. In short, Taylor's approach calls for *articulation* rather than *systematization*. It is important to note that for Taylor, our moral reactions can be quite unlike Rawlsian "considered judgments" in the sense that we don't know how to properly characterize our feeling. Moral intuitions aren't givens—they are often problems that require interpretation and discernment. The issue is finding language to best make sense of our reaction rather than finding a general principle

---

[251] Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 11-12.

[252] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1971), §9; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2001), §10. Appiah considers Rawls as a top candidate for finding a middle solution to the "intuition problem" but provides an incisive critique. See Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 78-82.

[253] See Cheryl Noble's criticism of asymmetry between Rawls-style reflective equilibrium approaches to moral intuitions/data and scientific theories. Cheryl Noble, "Normative Ethical Theories," *The Monist* 62 (October 1979), 496-509.

[254] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 47.

that will subsume the particular, pre-packaged moral judgment. This hermeneutical moment gets covered over in the standard procedural models.[255] Given that our moral intuitions are themselves in need of clarification, i.e., they don't have a stable description but rather require further characterization or re-characterization, the task becomes fundamentally hermeneutical. In other words, we may need to, as we quoted before, "go deeper into our feelings," which also requires getting at "the imports which underlie them and give them their point." Taylor is calling for us to describe the significance of our moral reactions. The terminus is thus a "thicker description" than our previous interpretations, i.e., an interpretation that sharpens our understanding of the goods involved, rather than the reduction of our reactions to a procedure that will organize them.[256] Moral articulation, in Taylor's words, "gives a fuller, more vivid, or clearer, better-defined understanding of what the good is."[257] In this way it helps us work out our moral intuitions, i.e., it amounts to a clarification of *what* we feel, *why* we feel it, and *whether* we ought to feel it. While Taylor might superficially resemble theorists who begin with our moral intuitions, he does not attempt to build a theory with them—at least, not in the reviled, polemicized sense of theory as systematizing, proceduralizing, or mathematizing moral thinking.

To summarize the argument so far, naturalism is seen as a source of procedural moral thinking in the sense that it tempts us to adopt an inappropriate model for moral reasoning. If we come to view our moral reactions as such as inappropriate, we may attempt to ground moral thinking on something wholly other than our ethical reactions. This is to make a fundamental mistake, on Taylor's view, in thinking that we can make sense of the ethical life—something constituted by the meanings interpreting and thereby shaping our reactions—in something like logical consistency or instrumental rationality. The notion of moral articulacy thus re-orients moral thinking around our moral intuitions conceived in a specific sense—namely, as interpreted moral feelings. The point is

---

[255] Appiah has eloquently made a similar point: "In the real world, the act of framing—the act of describing a situation, and thus of determining that there's a decision to be made—is itself a moral task. It's often *the* moral task." Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 196.

[256] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 80. Taylor draws the term "thick description" from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), chapter 1.

[257] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 74.

not just that there is no external grounding of the moral life outside of moral reactions—although Taylor is certainly making this point—but that moral thinking is itself a hermeneutical affair within that realm of interpreted moral feelings. In this way Taylor's position differs not just from Hare-Brandt style approaches but also those of the Slote-Rawls style.

## 2.4 Naturalistic Ethics Re-considered

Taylor draws a direct link between naturalism, taken in its reductionist or "bald" sense, and the "cramped" character of modern moral philosophy. His story rests on the claim that ethical reasoning modeled on the natural sciences requires us to distance ourselves from our moral emotions. This culminates in pictures of morality that specify a singular decision procedure that stands completely outside our moral sentiments passing judgment on them and hammering them into place, when necessary. But as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, much of the explicitly naturalist philosophy today adopts a more moderate approach that doesn't try to reduce all modes of sense-making to the causal (to use Flanagan's idiom) or cram the "space of reasons" into the "realm of law" (to use McDowell's idiom). In light of these moderate naturalisms, which are hospitable to anthropocentric properties, i.e., the meanings constitutive of the human lifeworlds, the thread connecting naturalism to procedural moral theory begins to fray. Our question is now: what does a naturalistic ethic look like? Does it have the shape Taylor suspects?

Let's begin with a logically prior question: what does it mean to make an ethical theory 'naturalistic' in a non-reductive sense? Bernard Williams provides a clue: "The question for naturalism is always: can we explain, by some appropriate and relevant criteria of explanation, the phenomenon in question in terms of the *rest* of nature?"[258] This yields the idea that we ought "never explain the ethical in terms of something special to ethics if you can explain it in terms that apply to the non-ethical as well."[259] Williams's interpretation of naturalism in ethics thus tells us how we

---

[258] Bernard Williams, "Naturalism and Genealogy," in *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, ed. Edward Harcourt (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 150.
[259] Williams, "Replies," 204.

should proceed in explaining morality. It avoids the ontological dogmatism of some views that start out from a bold ontological claim about what exists. Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, the "Duke naturalists" as they refer to themselves, make a similar move interpreting a naturalistic ethic primarily as a matter of methodology rather than ontology: "Ethical naturalism is not chiefly concerned with ontology but with the proper way of approaching moral inquiry. Ethical naturalism thus has a number of methodological commitments, only part of which consists in a rejection of supernatural forces when explaining or justifying value and principles."[260] We should thus distinguish between "*methodological* naturalism" and "*ontological* naturalism."[261] The central methodological point here is summed up in the following: "the naturalist is committed to there being no sharp distinction between her investigation and those of relevant other disciplines (particularly between epistemology and psychology). In other words, ethical science must be continuous with other sciences."[262] As we saw in our earlier discussion of Flanagan—and this is a key point— continuity with nature/natural science does not require the elimination of anthropocentric properties, imports, meanings, and articulations, i.e., Taylor's worry. In other words, methodological naturalism seeks to draw on the other sciences in understanding morality but this does not necessarily eliminate human meanings.

What does moral theory look like under the assumption of methodological naturalism? Does it result in Hare-Brandt style austerity measures? Does it lead us on a path to the much reviled 'decision procedure'? A look at explicitly naturalistic moral philosophies reveals no clear link between methodological naturalism and procedural moral theory.[263] Indeed, several ethical naturalists stake out decisively anti-procedural conceptions of ethics. Kwame Anthony Appiah, who has recently

---

[260] Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, "Naturalizing Ethics," in *Moral Psychology Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 5.
[261] While this distinction is fairly common, I take these terms come from, John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 109, italics in original; cf. Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 23.
[262] Flangan et al., "Naturalizing Ethics," 5.
[263] Some thinkers of a naturalistic persuasion, however, do hold out hope for the possibility of achieving a moral theory in the traditional (and much reviled) sense. See Allan Gibbard, "Why Theorize How to Live with Each Other?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (June 1995), 323-342.

undertaken to show the relevance of empirical observation to ethics and thereby "reconstitute the 'moral sciences,'" captures a common thought: "Anyone looking for decision procedures, a way of ranking values or a set of rules for choosing among them, should be warned that a 'naturalized ethics' is never going to get us there. This isn't because of any crevasse between 'is' and 'ought'; it's because there's no there there. Normative theories, if they are sensible, do not offer algorithms for action."[264] A closer look at two examples, Owen Flanagan and Mark Johnson, confirms that naturalistic theories not only don't generate general systems of rules or decision procedures. Rather these versions of ethical naturalism sketch general contours for human well being that provide the outer-bounds, as it were, for properly functioning moralities. Beyond this they allow substantial room for flexibility, contingency, and variability in human moralities.

Let's begin by considering the work of Owen Flanagan. Far than leading him to embrace a reductionistic moral theory, a thorough-going commitment to methodological naturalism leads him to reject the idea of "a general-purpose moral algorithm suitable for solving all moral problems in all domains" as incompatible with an empirically informed moral psychology.[265] Flanagan's grounds for rejecting a procedural model of moral thinking are grounded in the idea that such a model fits poorly with our best empirically grounded understanding of how moral cognition works. The prototype structure of our cognition, including moral thinking, which is refined through socialization, doesn't lead us to a neat, unified system but rather helps us appreciate the disorder of our own morality:

> moral responsiveness does not (normally) involve deployment of a set of special purpose rules or algorithms that are individually applied to all and only, the problems for which they are designed specifically. Nor does moral responsiveness normally involve deployment of a single general-purpose rule or algorithm, such as the principle of utility or the categorical imperative, designed to deal with each and every moral problem. Moral issues are heterogeneous in kind, and the moral community wisely trains us to possess a vast array of moral competencies suited—often in complex combinations and configurations—to

---

[264] Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 193. Indeed, in his survey of the anti-theory literature Tom Sorrell includes a section on naturalistic anti-theory, and mentions (critically) both Johnson and Flanagan in this connection. See Tom Sorrell, *Moral Theory and Anomaly* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 23-27.

[265] Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 6.

multifarious domains, competencies that in fact and in theory resist unification under either a set of special-purpose rules or under a single general-purpose rule or principle.[266]

Flanagan, one of the most articulate spokespersons for ethical naturalism writing today, thus counts as a stark counter-example to the naturalism-proceduralism connection maintained in Taylor's work.

Instead of modeling ethical thinking on a system of general rules, ethical naturalism is better understood, Flanagan argues, according to an ecological model. As he and his collaborators have put it, "If ethics is like any science or is part of any science, it is part of *human ecology*, concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments."[267] There is a hope in this kind of project that empirical research will bear out certain general ethical norms for flourishing. Flanagan calls this science of well-being "eudaimonics."[268] The idea here is that there are substantial general ethical norms to be expected across cultures given our similar biological make-ups but there will also be widespread variance in ethical norms and virtues depending on the local practices, culture, and institutions—in short, the habitat.[269] Flanagan writes,

> Thinking of normative ethical knowledge as something to be gleaned form thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches will make it easier for us to see that there are forces of many kinds, operating at many levels, as humans seek their good; that individual human good can compete with the good of human groups and of nonhuman systems; and, finally, that only some ethical knowledge is global, most is local, and appropriately so. It might also make it seem less compelling to find ethical agreement where none is needed.[270]

---

[266] Owen Flanagan, "Ethics Naturalized: Ethics as Human Ecology" in *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics*, eds. Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 30.

[267] Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, "Naturalizing Ethics," in *Moral Psychology Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 18.

[268] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem*, 1-4, also see chapter 2.

[269] He writes, "there are almost certainly universal necessities across all human environments that pull for and thus make rational certain prohibitions such as ones against murdering innocents, stealing rightfully owned property, and so on. Beyond these 'big-ticket' items, local ecological conditions will create their own pressures on normative construction." Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem*, 123.

[270] Flanagan, "Ethics Naturalized: Ethics as Human Ecology," 36.

The ecological viewpoint thus gives us a way of reconciling both the general and the local conditions for human flourishing. It amounts to a species ethical relativism bounded by commonly shared features of our natures as members of the species *homo sapiens*.[271]

The science of eudaimonics leads with the ethical question of what best enables us to flourish both as individuals and as members of our species. While this will share certain things with the flourishing of, say, trees and flowers, bumblebees and lions, Flanagan's eudaimonics is a non-reductive enterprise that recognizes the human need to find meaning, to make our lives meaningful, a point that is, on his view, compatible with the moderate naturalist program. He writes, "A broad philosophical naturalism can accommodate our unusual nature as social animals that both discover and make meaning. If this is right, there is nothing inherently disturbing or disenchanting about the naturalistic picture of human being."[272] This is, as it were, part of our nature: "We are social animals. One thing this means is that we must be immersed in a culture and a Space of Meaning if we are to make sense of things and find meaning."[273] In this respect Flanagan's naturalism can do justice to the imports, interpretations, and articulations that has pride of place in Taylor's work. The picture we find in Flanagan is thus an empirically grounded approach to ethics that is both hostile to decision procedures as well as friendly to world-constituting meanings.

A look at another leading ethical naturalist, Mark Johnson, further confirms our suspicion that a naturalistic ethic is both friendlier to human meanings and less friendly to procedural moral systems than Taylor assumes. Rooted in a robust appreciation of the importance of empirical research, he advances a powerful vision of the moral life that places the imagination at its center.[274] "What is needed," Johnson tells us, "is a new, empirically responsible moral philosophy."[275] His work

---

[271] As Flanagan and his colleagues put it, "Pluralistic relativism articulates and advances a theory about the constraints on 'morally adequate' plural ways of life that aim at the set (or some subset) of the goods that constitute morality, broadly construed." Flanagan et al., "Naturalizing Ethics," 17.

[272] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem*, 3.

[273] Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem*, 126.

[274] See Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Mark L. Johnson, "How Moral Psychology Changes Moral Theory," in *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics*, ed. Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 45-68.

[275] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 11.

draws heavily on research from cognitive linguistics into the pervasive role of metaphor in human thinking, and this has significant consequences for moral thinking. As he tells us, "metaphor is everywhere in morality."[276] Specifically, he notes two ways in which metaphor pervades our moral thinking: (a) it constitutes some of our central moral concepts—think of how you talk of 'owing' others (his example)—and (b) it sets up how we think of particular situations, e.g., how you might think of marriage in terms of duty or unity or growth (his examples).[277] Even Kant, the poster-child of a rationalistic moral theory, relies on metaphors to make his case, e.g., the various formulations of the categorical imperative articulated through images of natural law, self-legislation, or a kingdom of rational agents.[278]

Moreover, moral cognition, Johnson maintains, doesn't generate general laws for clearly subsuming particular instances because our concepts (including moral concepts) have a "prototype structure."[279] This means that while some cases might fit clearly into the "relatively stable core" of a given concept, others will fall into the indeterminate periphery. This explains, Johnson thinks, the well-known frustrating feature of our thinking that there arise intractable disputes regarding how we go on that cannot be settled simply by appealing to the content of our moral concepts.[280] This is one reason why "moral deliberation is better described as imaginative exploration and transformation of experience, instead of the pigeonholing of cases under a set of fixed rules."[281]

For our purposes there are three key points about Johnson's ethical naturalism. First, not only does his empirically grounded view not align with a procedural moral theory but it provides grounds on which to doubt the viability of constructing a moral system or procedure. As he puts it, "Morality conceived as a system of laws is simply too narrow and too unimaginative to capture most of what goes on in our moral experience. It ends up ignoring just those imaginative dimensions of

---

[276] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 35.

[277] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, chapter 2, especially 33, 61.

[278] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, chapter 3, especially 73-74.

[279] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, chapter 4 and chapter 8. See also Patricia S. Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), chapter 7.

[280] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 99-104, quote from p. 99.

[281] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 80.

our reasoning and deliberation that are the key to our moral understanding."[282] Second, Johnson

finds in our biological make-up, our cognitive apparatus, our sociality, and our environment

dependence grounds for certain ethical constraints on human moralities that still leaves room for

contingencies of language, culture, and history.[283] Empirical study of human morality leads us to the

conclusion that "there is no single correct method for figuring out what to do in a situation. There

are general principles and imaginative ideals, but they do not determine one true method."[284] Finally,

nothing in Johnson's work poses problems for the meanings, imports, and interpretations

constitutive of the moral world. Far from excluding human meanings and interpretations from its

explanations of human life, it details the pervasive need for imaginative interpretation and re-

interpretation on the basis of the metaphorical character of human concepts.[285]

On closer examination, there is no tight link between ethical naturalism and proceduralism.

In fact, those approaches to morality that take empirical research seriously provide grounds to doubt

that morality will, upon reflection, assume the form of an ultimate decision procedure or system of

general principles. Instead we've found a powerful strand of ethical naturalism that culminates in a

bounded relativism, i.e., a picture of general limitations on human well-being that permits local

variation.[286] Moreover, in both versions of ethical naturalism examined above we did not see ethical

meanings shunned. Rather these were explained as constitutive of our type of meaning-seeking,

metaphorical animal.

---

[282] Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 104.

[283] See Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, chapter 9, especially p. 237-243.

[284] Johnson, *Moral Imagination,* 242.

[285] Here we re-encounter the importance of metaphor and imagination for Johnson. These provide the means of producing novel interpretations, specifically in moving beyond the limited core meaning of moral prototypes. He writes, "Metaphor is our chief device for extensions from prototypes to novel cases." See Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, chapter 8, quote from p. 195.

[286] The two versions we have surveyed so far are upbeat on this semi-relativized predicament. Other naturalist thinkers like Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams reach very similar conclusions with regard to the general shape of a naturalistic ethic—namely, general limits on human well-being that "underdetermine" our ethical thinking. It seems to me that the major difference between the Flanagan-Johnson view and the Hampshire-Williams view is simply whether "underdetermination" of the ethical by the natural is something to rejoice in or complain about. See Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983), chapter 7. Hampshire writes, "human nature, conceived in terms of common human needs and capacities, always underdetermines a way of life, and underdetermines an order of priority among virtues, and therefore underdetermines the moral prohibitions and injunctions that support a way of life" (155). Also see Bernard Williams*, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 52.

While the above discussion makes no pretense at being an exhaustive examination of Taylor's critique of naturalism, I hope to have demonstrated two points. First, Taylor cannot criticize methodological or moderate naturalism on the grounds that it leaves no space for meaning, interpretation, and articulation in the moral life. Second, ethical naturalism doesn't itself entail or even tend towards a procedural moral theory that (a) specifies a decision procedure for moral thinking and/or (b) disconnects ethical thinking from the meanings making up our self-understandings *qua* self-interpreting animals. In short, naturalism doesn't entail procedural moral theories. And the articulation of the meanings constitutive of human lifeworlds is compatible with at least some variants of ethical naturalism.

## 2.5 Taylor's Pluralistic, Latitudinarian Meta-Ethic

Reductive naturalism is motivated by the idea that anything less strict, as Hilary Putnam aptly puts it, "will let in the 'occult,' the 'supernatural.'"[287] But the fear of the supernatural is not unique to so-called "bald" forms of naturalism. Even those attempts to articulate a moderate naturalism steer clear of the supernatural. Indeed, according to Owen Flanagan the common ground shared by all 'naturalistic' positions, even the non-bald variants, is precisely their rejection of the supernatural. He writes, "antisupernaturalism forms the common core, the common tenet, of 'naturalism' insofar as 'naturalism' is anything like a coherent philosophical doctrine spanning the last four centuries."[288] Flanagan specifies the meaning of 'supernaturalism' as follows:

> the objectionable form of 'supernaturalism' is one according to which (i) there exists a 'supernatural being or beings' or 'power(s)' outside the natural world; (ii) this 'being' or 'power' has causal commerce with this world; (iii) the grounds for belief in *both* the 'supernatural being' *and* its commerce cannot be seen, discovered, or inferred by way of any known and reliable epistemic models.[289]

---

[287] Putnam, "The Content and Appeal of Naturalism," 66.
[288] Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," 433. Cf. Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," 22-24 and Dupré, "The Miracle of Monism," 36-39.
[289] Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," 433. In a footnote, Flanagan notes that these three criteria do not necessarily entail the rejection of theism, and specifically that it isn't clear that Taylor, among others, buys into these three theses (433n2).

Even if we accept a moderate form of naturalism that doesn't adopt a one-size-fits-all explanatory model, there are still clear boundaries for what is not permitted to factor into our explanations of the natural world—namely, the supernatural.

Our earlier discussion raised the idea that Taylor's "self-interpreting animals" thesis may share substantial ground with moderate versions of naturalism. Indeed, in some places his work employs arguments developed by non-bald naturalists against reductive naturalism.[290] Both Taylor and this softer breed of naturalist reject the hegemony of natural science in making sense of our world and ourselves. The various critics of reductive naturalism split on how exactly to specify those dimensions of life that do not fit the mold of the natural sciences. As we noted above, Taylor's explicitly hermeneutical conception of human agency, specifically his notion of articulation, sets him apart from his fellow Anglo-American writers. But perhaps we have reason to think that Taylor drifts even more significantly from his fellow critics of reductive naturalism on another point—namely, the place of the supernatural. He is, after all, personally committed to Christian theism, and occasionally he gestures toward the desirability of a Christian ethic of *agape* love. How do these personal commitments factor into his meta-ethic? And to what extent, if at all, is Taylor's critique of naturalism linked to his theism?

An adequate answer these questions, I will argue, requires returning to an analysis of the concept of 'articulation.' As we have already seen in our discussion above, the primary sense of 'articulation' involves expressing and thereby "making sense" of our feelings of what matters, e.g., we would do this by formulating our feelings in terms of 'shame,' getting clear on the grounds for feeling shame, examining the presuppositions of such an attribution, and evaluating whether such things are actually 'shameful', and so on. At this point Taylor moves from a discussion of sense making to a discussion of moral ontology. He writes, "Ontological accounts have *the status of articulations of our moral instincts*. They articulate the claims implicit in our reactions. We can no longer argue about them at all once we assume a neutral stance and try to describe the facts as they are independent of these

---

[290] More specifically, he draws on the work of John McDowell. See Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology."

reactions."[291] Two points here are important. First, it is significant that Taylor describes moral ontology as being an *articulation* because it means the ontological commitments undergirding our moral feelings are not simply given. Rather our moral ontology is itself a product, at some level, of human creation. It is a mix of "discovery" and "invention."[292] Second, Taylor's talk of "making sense" here is ambiguous—it floats between weak ontological commitments of "anthropocentric properties" and much stronger commitments that make reference, at least implicitly, to something like big picture cosmology.[293] When Taylor talks of "ontological accounts" he moves without much fanfare between two very different levels of ontology. This is where we begin to see a space for the supernatural that sets him apart from moderate naturalisms.

The first level of moral ontology, as we have seen, follows simply by rejecting reductionistic naturalism. If we accept that natural science doesn't set the limits to the real, then our ontology can be enriched include "anthropocentric properties," i.e., the 'humiliating,' the 'depressing,' the 'insulting, the 'annoying' and so on. These properties can function as "imports" that can be used in justifications of our moral sentiments. Debates over whether or not and why something is 'shameful' are intelligible and our ontology needs to be rich enough, Taylor argues, to make sense of this fact. Anthropocentric properties (imports) make up one dimension of Taylor's moral ontology. They are, as it were, the raw materials which are used to construct what he calls the "moral space" within which agents live their lives, i.e., these various evaluative concepts structure our view of what is it to

---

[291] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8, italics mine.

[292] We see Taylor straddling the line between 'inventing' and 'discovering,' for instance in his discussion of meaning. He writes, "the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression. Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing. Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18; Also see Taylor, "Preface," *Philosophical Arguments*, ix-x. For a more technical discussion of this point cf. Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998), 145-163. For a partial criticism of this see Alan Thomas, *Value and Context: The Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 217-218.

[293] Taylor notes various articulations of the value of other human beings. He cites the belief "that human beings are creatures of God and made in his image, or that they are immortal souls, or that the are all emanations of divine fire, or that they are all rational agents and thus have a dignity which transcends any other beings, or some other chracterization; and that *therefore* we owe them respect." The articulation of the reason for the respect is a crucial part of the story on his view. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.

lead a good life.[294] Articulation culminates, at this level, in expressing a view of the good life that stands behind those moral reactions, what Taylor calls "life goods."[295] Articulation at this level is trying to describe what counts as a good life—both at individual and social levels. Such descriptions will, no doubt, be part of bigger stories we tell about our situations, social orders, and histories.

At this point Taylor's talk of "making sense" shifts, often without much notice, to another, more contentious level. Here Taylor stops talking about run-of-the-mill anthropocentric properties and begins talking about the underlying conceptions of the world assumed by moral agents. At this level articulation goes beyond articulating features of a good life and articulates *why* things are good. Here he introduces the concept of a "constitutive good" in order to pick out those "features of ourselves or the world or God such that their being what they are is essential to the life goods being good."[296] These are, in short, big picture accounts placing the human subject in the world that help make sense of why the good, however it is conceived, is, in fact, good. As Taylor puts it,

> Moral thinking can't be confined just to working out what we ought to do, or even to this along with determining what are good ways to be—definitions of the 'good life.' We also can't help bringing before ourselves *pictures of the human predicament which show the goodness and rightness of the things we feel bound to seek*. We do this not only to make further sense of and hence help further what these moral demands are. But also because these pictures give us a more lively sense of the worth and validity of these demands; they inspire us to live up to the good.[297]

For Taylor we not only make sense of our moral emotions in relation to certain properties or features of the world that justify those reactions but also make sense of these properties in relation to a broader understanding of the world in which we live, "pictures of the human predicament." Constitutive goods refer to the farthest reaches of the human world, the broadest understanding of what it is to be human, and these buttress our articulations of imports and lifegoods. These goods may not be explicit or directly serve as the justifications for our particular moral judgments, feelings,

---

[294] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2.

[295] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

[296] Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism" in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 70. Elsewhere Taylor expands on what is captured by this notion as follows: "features of the universe, or God, or human beings, (i) on which the life goods depend, (ii) which command our awe or allegiance, and (iii) the contemplation of or contact with which empowers us to be good." Charles Taylor, "Comments and Replies," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 243.

[297] Charles Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 212, italics mine.

and/or commitments, but they do, at least, indirectly bear on them. They are in the background of our thoughts in the sense that were they radically otherwise, those judgments, feelings, and/or commitments would need to be reconsidered and potentially altered or abandoned.

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor identifies three main constitutive goods in western intellectual history, goods that persist on into the modern age—Christian theism, the "disengaged rationality" emerging in the Enlightenment, and the "expressivism" that developed as part of the Romantic reaction to the former.[298] But it would be a mistake to conclude that these are the only constitutive goods. As it becomes clear in his other writings, these are just examples of possible constitutive goods.[299] The list of constitutive goods can be expanded. The key idea isn't the *content* of the constitutive good, which is variable, but rather the *function* played by it. Indeed, Taylor even cites Camus's conception of a meaningless universe that demands courage in the face of absurdity as an example of a constitutive good.[300] He writes, "Even in the most anti-theological and anti-metaphysical ethic there is such a moment of the recognition of something which is not made or decided by human beings, and which shows a certain way of being to be good and admirable."[301] Any ethical stance gets its bearings in some world or another. The point is our understanding of the world imposes limits that shape the space within which we make evaluative judgments.[302] Constitutive goods, I want to stress, refer to structural features of our self-understanding that can be filled by various conceptions of ourselves and our world. Indeed, the goods that make up the backdrop to the modern moral life, as Taylor makes clear, are multiple, stand in tension, and influence each other.[303]

---

[298] Three constitutive goods for the modern western world are: "the original theistic grounding for these standards; a second one that centres on a naturalism of disengaged reason, which in our day takes scientistic forms; and a third family of views which finds its sources in Romantic expressivism or in one of the modernists successor versions. The original unity of the theistic horizon has been shattered, and the sources can now be found on diverse frontiers, including our own powers and nature." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 495.

[299] Cf. Hartmut Rosa, "Goods and Life-Forms: Relativism in Charles Taylor's Political Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 71 (May/June 1995): 24. He writes, "a variety of other moral sources are conceivable and in historically or geographically different cultures do or did obtain."

[300] Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," 212; Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 582-589.

[301] Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," 212.

[302] He will thus sometimes talk about the "moral space" within which moral agents lead their lives. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2. Constitutive goods count as the outermost bound of this space.

[303] He writes, "my map is overschematic. For one thing, the three domains don't stay the same; they are continually borrowing from and influenced by each other. For another, there have been various attempts to

Part of Taylor's claim in *Sources* is that we live in something of a historical train wreck as far as the intellectual backdrop of our moral lives go and find ourselves committed to a wide range of ethical values springing from these various sources, all of which nonetheless "are goods…by which we moderns live."[304]

Taylor makes clear that the concept of a "constitutive good" doesn't bring into play in itself the supernatural. There are many constitutive goods that are friendly to naturalism. He writes,

> Now it might be thought that constitutive goods figure only in theistic or metaphysical ethics, that they have no place in a modern humanistic outlook. But this would be a mistake. In a modern humanistic ethic, the locus of the constitutive good is displaced onto the human being itself. In Kant, the sense of the dignity of human life, as rational agency soaring above everything else in the universe, is an example of the identification of a constitutive good in a humanistic ethic. My claim is that something like this sense of the dignity and value of human life, of the nobility of rational freedom, underpins the ethical consciousness of our contemporaries and plays the two roles we can see it occupying in Kant's philosophy: it defines why the human being commands our respect when she or he is the object of our action; and it sets us an ideal for our own action.[305]

Not only is the constitutive good of rational agency (Kant) a clear example, but the aforementioned courage in the face of the absurd (Camus) counts as a second clear example. Thus, there is nothing about Taylor's meta-ethic that entails the supernatural. His attempt to spell out a theoretical vocabulary for talking about various dimensions of the good life doesn't entail that the good life be construed in a way incompatible with a moderate naturalism.

Nevertheless, Taylor's meta-ethic of articulacy is notably more permissive than, say, Flanagan-style ethical naturalism. As Taylor reminds us, "Much of ethics in human history has been articulated in terms of religious or metaphysical beliefs."[306] That is to say, some articulations of constitutive goods go beyond the limits of even moderate naturalism. For on his view God *may enter* the picture *as an articulation* of our moral sentiments. We have thus located more precisely where the

---

straddle the boundaries and combine more than one." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 496. He has been critized, however, for not being pluralistic enough in his conception of constitutive goods. See William E. Connolly, "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 166-186.

[304] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 25, § 3, quote from p. 511.

[305] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 11. For more on the role of rational dignity as a constitutive good in Kant's moral philosophy see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 94-95.

[306] Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," 316.

difference lies between Taylor and moderate naturalists—namely, Taylor's "*openness*" to the divine,

the transcendent, to religious ethics.[307] To be clear, nothing in his meta-ethics entails that ethics must

make reference to the supernatural, but, it remains a possibility, on his view. Taylor's broad-minded

pluralism leads him, as I noted in the first chapter, to lay the intellectual groundwork for ethical

dialogue that includes even religious positions. This means that our meta-ethic cannot, as in ethical

naturalism, exclude religious ethical outlooks from the outset. Religious ethics are thus given a place

within his view as possible articulations of the good. Taylor writes, for instance, "the belief in God

offers…an articulation of what is crucial to the shape of the moral world in one's best account."[308]

The key point is that *qua* articulation, the belief in God follows from our moral intuitions as an

expression of them rather than as a starting point from which we deduce our obligations. The order

of explanation here is key. The kind of theistic ethic that fits with Taylor's meta-ethic does not first

establish the existence of divine and then derive from his revelation moral obligations. Rather it

moves in reverse. For Taylor the moral life takes off from certain moral emotions, which count as

our "access" point to a world of value(s). But this world of value(s) isn't simply a given; it is a

product of human expression. Seen in this light, the belief in God relates to ethics as something that

expresses our moral emotions; "It offers a reason rather as I do when I lay out my most basic

concerns in order to make sense of my life to you."[309] Taylor's view of articulacy is permissive

enough to be open to spiritual or religious perspectives *qua* articulations of the good, and as an

articulation these views are understood by Taylor as attempts to make clear more commonly shared

moral intuitions. But in the course of articulating these moral intuitions, they are also given shape.

And this leads to possible further disagreements not only at the level of constitutive goods but also

---

[307]As Michael L. Morgan summarizes Taylor's argument, "He does not argue directly that God and religion *should* play a central role in our moral lives; he does show how, subject to detailed clarification, they *could* do so." Morgan, "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse," 51. As Arto Laitinen has put it, "Taylor wants a moral theory to leave room for the role of God in the moral lives of those who believe in God. The role that God may have in morality is conceptualized with the help of the notion of constitutive goods or moral sources…What Taylor wants is that naturalists admit that they believe in *something*, although it is not God. Or at the bare minimum, Taylor seeks recognition for the fact that for those believing in God, God can be a moral source." Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 294.

[308] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 138-9. Also see Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation," 226-227.

[309] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 139.

first-order moral views.[310] In his words, "it is clear that for any given concrete position on extension, a plurality of ontological view can be arranged in a coalition behind it. But it is also clear that in *the logic of the actual arguments people make and follow, basis articulations have consequences for extension decisions.*"

The above discussion illuminates and is illuminated by a distinction I drew in the opening chapter between Taylor's two phases of argument—his *critique* of modern moral philosophy and his *positive vision* for ethics. If his meta-ethical arguments are successful, then Taylor's critique establishes a space of meaning-saturated interpretation giving expression to our moral emotions, which enrich our stock of values but are also themselves fallible. In other words phase one of Taylor's program clears a *space for articulation*. Within this new meta-ethical framework, however, articulations still need to be debated, reasoned out, and assessed. As we have seen, Taylor construes this space as having two dimensions—(a) substantive views expressing the good life and (b) the ontologies supporting the substantive views that explain the goodness of goods. And these two dimensions mutually influence each another. Nevertheless, Taylor's discussion does not always clearly distinguish between these two dimensions. When he talks about articulation in the moral life, he shifts quite subtlety between the import concepts that enable agents to spell out a view of the good life and the big picture understandings that place us within distinctive kinds of moral universe, as it were.

Given his treatment of Christian theism as an important "source" of our persisting moral commitments and his (admittedly, tentative) suggestions that we need to reconsider a Christian ethic of *agape,* one might suspect that Taylor's critique of naturalism paves the way for a re-introduction of the supernatural into ethical discourse. But this would misplace the supernatural in Taylor's thought. Or so I have argued. Our discussion above helps us to pinpoint where Taylor deviates from his fellow critics of reductive naturalism. His meta-ethic of moral articulacy in itself doesn't entail a break away from non-reductive naturalism, but it permits it by allowing the divine to be considered a legitimate articulation of the good at the level of "constitutive goods." So understood, however, belief in God or any other supernatural beliefs are seen as articulations. They are seen as the

---

[310] Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," 317-318, quote from p. 318, italics mine.

expressive outgrowths of moral experience rather than as the premises for deducing our moral obligations. The key point is that nothing in his critique of naturalism or his conception of meta-ethics entails that the supernatural play a role. At the level of critique, Taylor is motivated by a thoroughgoing pluralism that seeks facilitate broader moral dialogue than is standardly found in Anglo-American moral philosophy.

Where does this leave us? What's the take away from elaboration of the concept of 'articulation' against the backdrop of Taylor's critique of naturalism? I want to highlight four lessons: (1) the link between naturalism and proceduralism is not as direct as Taylor assumes; (2) articulation as a capacity springing from an understanding of human beings as self-interpreting animals is opposed to a reductive but not a moderate version of naturalism; (3) Taylor's meta-ethic of moral articulacy displays an *"openness"* to religious ethics insofar as these count as possible articulations of our sense of the good but nothing in the meta-ethic entails that we go beyond what would be accommodated by a moderate naturalism; (4) finally, this I suggested was motivated by his own desire to reframe moral philosophy at a meta-ethical level in a way that permits and encourages a broad, pluralistic moral dialogue.

## Chapter 3: Articulating Articulation II:

## Moral Philosophy After the Epistemological Picture

This chapter continues the task of articulating Taylor's notion of 'articulation' and chasing out its implications for the moral life, especially its impact on moral theory. While the previous chapter articulated 'moral articulacy' through an engagement with naturalism, this chapter proceeds by way of Taylor's critique of what he calls "the epistemological picture," his counter-conception of "engaged agency," and his "expressivist" view of language.[311] As I hope to demonstrate, these various pieces of Taylor's philosophy interlock in such a way that places 'articulation' at the center of the human condition. What emerges is a hermeneutical conception of ethical life that poses a challenge to central assumptions held by some modern moral theorists—namely, theory's self-sufficiency and authority.

Taylor's conception of articulation, I want to argue, has two major consequences for moral philosophy, specifically the defensibility of modern moral theories. First, our discussion of Taylor's view of "engaged agency" will show the essential structural feature of an ever-present, inarticulate "background" for human reflection and action. This forecloses the option of eliminating inarticulacy altogether. I call this *structural inarticulacy*. If Taylor is right about the foreground/background structure presupposed by human thought and action, then moral reflection too will take on these characteristics. This gives Taylor a renewed way of defending the central place of *phronetic* judgment in the moral life. The implication for moral theory is that it cannot be viewed as self-sufficient. Instead theory is reliant on a background moral understanding that it can never assimilate to the theoretical apparatus.

Second, seen through the prism of "engaged agency" and its concomitant background/foreground structure, we can see our moral concepts, judgments, and theories as *modes of*

---

[311] For another essay that touches on "engaged agency" and "expressivism" with a different driving purpose see Nicholas H. Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition" in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 29-51.

*articulation*. This move has significant implications for the status of moral theory for the reason that we can articulate the moral life in many different ways. Seen in this light, theories no longer have exclusive rights to articulacy. And if moral theories are not the only way to articulate the moral life, why should we give them a privileged status among articulations? And if moral theory is just one form of articulation among others, to what extent is it dispensable? Re-orienting the discussion around the notion of moral articulacy can lead, I want to suggest, to the subversion of the self-sufficiency, exclusivity, priority, and even necessity of moral theory. This reveals yet another way in which Taylor's notion of 'articulacy' is of great consequence to moral thinking.

## 3.1 The Epistemological Picture, Engaged Agency, and the Background

While Taylor's early writings up through *Sources of the Self* portray a reductionistic breed of "naturalism" as the primary culprit in modernity's self-*mis*understanding, Taylor's work collected in *Philosophical Arguments* up through the publication of *A Secular Age* begins to shift focus towards another source of modernity's woes. Taylor calls this intellectual block, perhaps confusingly, "epistemology" or more recently, "the epistemological picture."[312] This source of modernity's disquiet counts as a second important foil against which the concept of articulation is itself articulated. In this chapter I want to show how this strand of Taylor's thought plays a crucial role in supplying 'articulation' with content.

What does Taylor mean when he criticizes the "epistemological picture" at work in modern philosophy? Extending far beyond the technical sub-field concerned with barn facades and thermometer-enhanced brains, "the epistemological picture" refers to a pervasive set of unspoken

---

[312] See respectively, Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 1-19; Charles Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 26-49; Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Modern Epistemology," in *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology and Philosophy in Honour of Fergus Kerr* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 43-60. For an excellent discussion of Taylor's critique of "epistemology," especially with regard to Taylor's position vis-à-vis Richard Rorty's anti-realism see Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Taylor's (Anti-) Epistemology," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 52-83. Also see Charles Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein," in *Philosophical Arguments* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995) chapter 4; Charles Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 317-336.

assumptions governing how we moderns think about our relation to the world around us, other people, and ourselves. Taylor's description of epistemology as a *"picture"* is significant. By calling it a "picture," he draws our attention to the way certain philosophical assumptions have worked their way into our lived experience of the world. Epistemology thus functions primarily as what he calls "a structuring framework."[313] By this Taylor means, "an underlying picture which is only partly consciously entertained, but which controls the way people think, argue, infer, make sense of things."[314] We can become so accustomed to an unspoken, implicit construal of how we relate to the world around us that we cease to be aware that we have other options. Part of Taylor's project is to remind us that we do, in fact, have alternatives.

What is the content of "the epistemological picture" that supposedly orders our thinking, even if we are not consciously aware of it? At the heart of this view is a conception of how human beings relate to others and the world around them. Taylor calls the vision of agency *epistemological* because it is built around a specific conception of knowing—namely, a "mediational picture."[315] He characterizes the essential content of this picture as follows: "knowledge is to be seen as correct representation of an independent reality. In its original form it saw knowledge as the inner depiction of an outer reality."[316] This picture of our relation to the world has profound consequences for how we think of human agency. Taylor elaborates:

> this structure operates with a picture of knowing agents as individuals, who build up their understanding of the world through combining and relating, in more and more comprehensive theories, the information which they take in, and which is couched in inner representations, be these conceived as mental pictures (in the earlier variants), or as something like sentences held true in the more contemporary versions…Knowledge of the self and its states comes before knowledge of external reality and of others. The knowledge of reality as neutral fact comes before our attributing to its various 'values' and relevances. And, of course, knowledge of the things of 'this world', of the natural order precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it.[317]

---

[313] Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," 27-8.
[314] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007), 557.
[315] Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," 29.
[316] Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 3. As he writes elsewhere, "Knowledge of things outside the mind/agent/organism only comes through certain surface conditions, mental images, or conceptual schemes within the mind/agent/organism The input is combined, computed over, or structured by the mind to construct a view of what lies outside." Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," 27.
[317] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 557-8.

The epistemological conception of the human condition imagines a gap between the representer and the represented world, i.e., the subject and object, and this gap is to be bridged in a piecemeal fashion by assembling, as it were, representational atoms. The agent is conceived essentially as an individual who gathers together bits of "external," value-free information and puts these together to form a conception of the world.

Taylor further analyzes the above description of the "epistemological" take on things in terms of a set of what he calls "priority relations"[318] concerning our relationship to others, self, and world. The idea here is that some things are conceived in virtue of others. Four prioritizations, according to Taylor, define the background of modern thought: (1) representation over engagement, (2) individual over community, (3) a neutral over a meaning-laden world, and (4) the immanent over the transcendent.[319] On the epistemological model, the former terms serve as the basis for the latter. For the purposes motivating our inquiry—namely, Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy—I will limit my discussion to the first three relations of priority. Our interest is in the role of the good in moral thinking—not whether or not the good ought to be understood immanently or transcendentally. This latter question presupposes the relevance of the good, the issue at stake in this thesis.[320]

The epistemologically driven conception of human agency sees belief formation—more specifically, correctly representing the world—as laying the basis for action in the world. *First* we arrive at beliefs about objects in the world and *then* we do things with these beliefs. In this way representation is conceptually prior to activity. Above all, these activities are in principle intelligible with or without the know-how gained in our engagement with the world, including that of unspoken,

---

[318] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558.

[319] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558-9. In Taylor's words, the "epistemological picture" amounts to the following: "Knowledge of the self and its states come before knowledge of external reality and of others. The knowledge of reality of neutral fact comes before our attributing various 'values' or relevances. And, of course, knowledge of things of 'this world', of the natural order precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it" (558).

[320] This limitation presupposes the distinction between two phases of Taylor's argument. See the discussion of this in Chapter 1, §4.

unanalyzed, bodily doings. Since this view starts with a picture of the individual representing the world around her, we are tempted to conceive of human social relations atomistically. Human communities are seen as emerging only when individuals band together to form a collective. Finally, the world inhabited by these individual representers is conceived as in-itself devoid of values. Given the priority of the world of scientific explanation over lived experience, the values we encounter in our daily lives are downgraded to mere projections onto an otherwise neutral world.[321]

While Taylor paints "the epistemological picture" with quite rough strokes, it depicts, even if only impressionistically, recognizable aspects of a prominent philosophical temperament. This sketch of "epistemology" serves as a foil against which we can more clearly recognize the distinctive features of Taylor's positive vision of human agency, a vision he refers to as "engaged agency"[322] because of its emphasis on our active bodily engagement with the world. This counter-picture, which Taylor recognizably draws from the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, reverses all of the "priority relations" constituting the epistemological picture. Taylor maintains that in order to make sense of our experience as human agents we have to assume that (1) engaged, embodied activity is prior to intellectual representation, (2) social groups are prior to individual selves, and (3) a world experienced as value-charged is prior to that bland, neutral world pictured by modern science.[323] When we abandon the epistemological picture, the following vision of agency comes into view:

> We only have knowledge as agents coping with a world, which it makes no sense to doubt, since we are dealing with it. There is no priority of the neutral grasp of things over their

[321] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 557-9. On atomism in our understanding of human social relations also see Charles Taylor, "Irreducibly Social Goods," in *Philosophical Arguments*, chapter 7.

[322] This notion of agency is developed in a series of essays on Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. See, for instance, Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein"; Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger"; Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture." For another discussion of Taylor's view of "engaged agency" that connects it to the question of moral realism see Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources: On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), chapter 5. This treatment, which has a markedly different focus, neglects the importance of "the background" to the moral life, a concept, as we shall see, that plays a central role in Taylor's account of agency.

[323] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 558-559. To these we might add (4) a place for the transcendent is opened up as an element in a disclosed world rather than itself a distant conclusion in a chain of reasons. Taylor puts this last point about transcendence as follows: "Even if we don't…consider something like the divine as part of the inescapable context of human action, the whole sense that it comes as a remote and most fragile inference or addition in a long chain is totally undercut by this overturning of epistemology." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 559.

value. There is no priority of the individual's sense of self over the society; our most primordial identity is as a new player being inducted into an old game.[324]

This summarizes Taylor's "engaged" conception of moral agency, the counter-picture to the epistemological model of human agency.

Escaping from the epistemological set-up brings into play a new set of "priority relations" where embodied, social, value-imbued practices are more basic than individualistic representations of a value-neutral world. But in what sense do the new priority relations listed above have "priority" over the dimensions emphasized by the epistemological picture? Taylor points to two ways in which "engaged agency" is prior to the picture coming down to us from the epistemological tradition.[325] First, our active, bodily engagement with the world "is always there," i.e., engaged activity constitutes the ever-present flow of human life. The formation of an explicit belief counts only as a moment within the stream of activity. Even while typing this argument, for instance, my body rests against my chair, my fingers dance across the keyboard. Explicit thought punctuates that activity. Engaged, bodily activity forms the backdrop to any thought an agent might entertain, any belief an agent might form. It is the sustaining activity for intellectual reflection.

Second, this engaged activity is a necessary pre-requisite for the intelligibility of explicit belief and representation. As Taylor puts it, "the representations we do make are only comprehensible against the background provided by this inarticulate understanding."[326] He elaborates,

> The mass of coping is an essential support to the episodes of conceptual focus in our lives, not just in the infrastructural sense that something has to be carrying our mind around from library to laboratory and back. More fundamentally, the background understanding we need to make the sense we do of the pieces of thinking we engage in resides in our ordinary coping.[327]

---

[324] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 559.

[325] Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 170; Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, eds. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 308.

[326] Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," 170.

[327] Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," 35-36.

This leads Taylor to describe our various engagements with the world as "the conditions of intelligibility" for forming explicit, disengaged beliefs at all.[328] That is because explicit beliefs presuppose knowledge and know-how that remains out of focus, as it were. Consider the simple thought that 'I should drive home before the weather gets bad.' This rests on an understanding of the kind of obstacle that heavy rain or snow might pose to one's plans, say, making dinner at home. Behind the thought, as it were, is a sense of my distance from my home, an awareness of the consequences that leaving too late might pose for one's plans, an understanding that there is still a temporary window for safe passage, the know-how of driving a car, and so on. These considerations are the background of one's explicit deliberations, even though they are far from being formulated thoughts. Recognizing the priority of "engaged agency" over representation has big implications: "Rather than representations being the primary locus of understanding, they are only islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp on the world."[329]

Taylor's conception of "engaged agency" introduces the notion of "the background" as those inarticulate, embodied dealings with the world that make the formation of explicit beliefs possible. It thus captures the two forms of conceptual priority described above. He speaks of it as the necessary context within which we can determine the sense of any given thing.[330] The "background" picks out, in his words, the "largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines, because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature."[331] These various features of our situational awareness may never be consciously brought to bear on one's deliberations, but they still play a role in rendering our thoughts and actions intelligible.

The "background" refers to the structural *role* that our active engagement with the world plays in relation to our particular thoughts and deeds. This does not entail, however, that the

---

[328] Taylor, "Engaged Agency and background in Heidegger," 319.
[329] Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," 170.
[330] Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," 325-326.
[331] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.

background consists of one piece. Indeed, the background is constituted by interconnections between a variety of understandings and competencies. Just think of trying to comfort someone after a bad test result or the loss of a competitive match. Sincerely comforting another person requires grasping the activity in question, understanding the significance of those activities both to that particular individual as well as within culture, and possessing the know-how way involved in comforting a person. This will involve things like speech, tone, bodily comportment and so on. All of these things are part of the background because they inform and make possible the activity in question. The background consists of no one thing but rather the whole package of interconnected meanings and competencies.

But recognizing the background competencies of getting around in the world as a condition for making sense of explicit beliefs overturns not only the first priority of the epistemological picture—namely, the priority of representation over engagement—but brings with it the reversal of the other priority relations as well. The key to understanding the link between engagement, sociality, and value is spelled out clearly by Taylor as follows:

> 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 be 'ours' in a number of ways…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.[332]

Indeed, it is the role of shared meanings that poses the deepest problems for the atomistic tendencies of the epistemological picture. The idea is that once you recognize the centrality of the background, the bit-by-bit thinking of the epistemological picture ceases to be credible. The intersubjectivity of meaning counts as "the undecomposable kernel against which atomism must break its teeth."[333]

Recognition of the background is the crucial move, according to Taylor, that led some of the greatest twentieth century thinkers out of the clutches of epistemology. Philosophers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein made clear exposed the deep unintelligibility of assembling the

---

[332] Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein," 76-77. On the "dialogical" dimension of our embodied activity also see Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," 171-173.

[333] Charles Taylor, "Irreducibly Social Goods" in *Philosophical Arguments*, 134-136, quote from 136.

world in a piecemeal fashion. Such an approach is unintelligible because individual units are meaningful only in virtue of broader, holistic contexts that are absent on such theoretical models under the spell of epistemology. Taylor reads these thinkers as following Kant in the tradition of launching transcendental arguments.[334] He writes, "With hindsight we can see them [i.e., Kant's transcendental deductions] as the first attempt to articulate the background that the modern disengaged picture itself requires for the operations it describes to be intelligible and use this articulation to undermine the picture."[335] The reason to prefer the "engaged" over the "epistemological" conception of human agency is that it makes better sense of human experience by showing the deep contexts necessary for making sense of bits of lived experience. Taylor reads the core move shared many of the leading anti-atomistic thinkers of the twentieth century as articulating the background contexts overlooked or ignored by epistemology.[336] Here we see a very fundamental way in which articulation is bound up with engaged agency—namely, those arguments for engaged agency (as opposed to the representational/epistemological conception of agency) are *acts of articulation.* They expose the failings of the epistemological picture by articulating the suppressed conditions for making sense of those moments of explicit representation privileged by the epistemologically centered view. They make explicit features of our situation ignored by the prevailing models. Once we are reminded of the fact of the background, the old models strike us as incredible.

---

[334] See Charles Taylor, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments," in *Philosophical Arguments*, chapter 2; Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 9-12; Charles Taylor, "Retrieving Realism," in *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph K. Schear (New York: Routledge, 2013), 82-87. For good discussions of the place of transcendental arguments in Taylor's work see Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 77-84; Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 7-8, 59-64.

[335] Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," 332.

[336] In reference to Wittgenstein and Heidegger he writes, "Articulation plays a crucial part in their argumentative strategy; it is central to the innovating force of their philosophy." Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein," 75.

### 3.2 Structural Inarticulacy

The foreground/background structure at the heart of Taylor's favored conception of agency counts as the necessary context for understanding the notion of articulation.[337] In this section I want to detail how articulation functions *within* this broader conception of engaged agency, specifically how it serves as the means by which an agent transforms her background awareness into an object of focus. Articulation serves as the means of going between the background and the foreground. The act of articulation zooms in on and clarifies an agent's background, situational awareness. Articulations formulate in explicit terms what Taylor sometimes calls our "agent's knowledge."[338] He writes:

> the background is what I am capable of articulating, that is, what I can bring out of the condition of merely implicit, unsaid contextual facilitator, and can make articulate in other words. In this activity of articulating, I trade on my familiarity with this background. What I bring out to articulacy is what I 'always knew,' as we might say, or what I had a 'sense' of, even if I didn't 'know' it. We are at a loss exactly what to say here, where we are trying to do justice to our not having been simply unaware.[339]

Taylor gives the following example of articulation at work:

> When I finally allow myself to recognize that what has been making me uncomfortable in this conversation is that I'm feeling jealous, I feel that in a sense I wasn't totally ignorant of this before. I knew it without knowing it. It has a kind of intermediate status between known and quite unknown. It was a kind of *proto-knowledge*, an environment propitious for the transformation that conceptual focus brings, even though there may also have been resistances.[340]

Articulation thus captures our ability to draw out aspects of our implicit understanding; it puts into words our previously fuzzy awareness of different aspects of our self and world. It transforms "proto-knowledge" into a candidate for knowledge. It might seem like an exaggeration or mischaracterization to say that articulation always formulates this background because it would seem to foreclose the possibility novel interpretations.[341] But Taylor is certainly open to "fresh insight" that

---

[337] Cf. Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, ??
[338] Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 10.
[339] Taylor, "Engaged agency and background in Heidegger," 326.
[340] Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," 35, italics mine.
[341] This thought seems to be in Redhead, *Charles Taylor*, ???

radically alters how we see things.[342] But even here, the new interpretation would prove its superiority

in relation to previous interpretations.[343] In this way, even radically new interpretations still relate

back to our background awareness by casting it in a "fresh," illuminating manner.

Understanding articulation by reference to the background/foreground of engaged agency

leads us to rethink the aspirations of articulation. Here we encounter what we might call *structural*

*inarticulacy*. The background/foreground structure makes any act of articulation dependent for its

intelligibility on a situational grasp that necessarily outstrips it. In Taylor's words,

> human thinking is situated thinking, in which any questions that can be raised only make
> sense against a background framework of the taken utterly for granted. Our capacity for
> rational reflection is such that some of what was formerly background can now be put into
> question, but only against its own background of the unchallenged. To grasp someone's
> form of life is to understand this pattern of questions against the unnoticed background,
> perhaps by participating in it unreflectively, perhaps also by some very partial explicit
> understanding of its limitations.[344]

And this means that at some level we will necessarily always be inarticulate about some features of

our experience. Articulation is never over. Taylor writes:

> The short answer to why complete articulacy is a chimera is that any articulation itself needs
> the background to succeed. Each fresh articulation draws its intelligibility in turn from a
> background sense, abstracted from which it would fail of meaning. Each new articulation
> helps to redefine us, and hence can open up new avenues of potential further articulation.
> The process is by its very nature uncompletable, since there is no limit on the facets or
> aspects of our form of life that one can try to describe or of standpoints from which one
> might attempt to describe it.[345]

As a consequence, the ambition of arriving at "self-possessing clarity," the unspoken goal of the

epistemological construal of agency, will remain an elusive dream because it neglects a fundamental

structural fact about human life—namely, the "never-fully articulable understanding of human life

---

[342] Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 39-41, quote from p. 39.

[343] This "comparative" mode of interpretation is Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 34-60.

[344] Charles Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 313. Also see Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein," 69-70.

[345] Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," 328. Elsewhere Taylor writes, "It can be made explicit, because we aren't completely unaware of it. But the expliciting itself supposes a background. The very fashion in which we operate as engaged agents within such a background makes the prospect of total expliciting incoherent." Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein," 70.

and experience" on which our explicit thinking relies.[346] The implication is that articulation is a

permanently ongoing task.[347] There is thus a sense in which inarticulacy is not a bad thing; it is simply

a permanent feature of the human condition.

These general structural features of human thinking are manifested in our attempts to

understand ourselves. That is to say, our attempts at making sense of ourselves exhibit this

inescapable foreground/background logic. Taylor writes:

> 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…*But articulation can by its very nature never be competed.*[348]

We are thus "self-interpreting animals" in a double sense. Not only are we the kind of being that

cannot be understood without reference to the meanings making up our self-descriptions, but also

we are never done interpreting ourselves.[349] Self-interpretation is our task, burden, birthright.

The foreground/background structure of human understanding might destine us to

perpetual inarticulacy, at some level, but this doesn't mean our background is static. Structural

inarticulacy isn't intellectual stagnancy. Indeed, the concept of articulation sheds light on how

reflection, including even moral theory, can stand in a dynamic relationship with background. As a

mediator between the foreground and background, articulation contributes to the dynamism of

human thought and understanding. Through articulation the background can become determinate or

thrown into question. Conversely breakthrough articulations can eventually cease to be fresh and

recede into the background of thought. Taylor writes,

> drawing a sharp line between this implicit grasp on things, and our formulated explicit understanding is impossible. It is not only that any frontier is porous, that things explicitly formulated and understood can 'sink down' into unarticulated know-how…and that our grasp on things can move as well in the other direction, as we articulate what was previously

---

[346] Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, viii.
[347] See Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 63.
[348] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 34, italics mine.
[349] See Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language*, chapter 2.

just lived out. It is also that any particular understanding of our situation blends explicit knowledge and unarticulated know-how.[350]

Arto Laitinen has described this as a "dialectic of innovation and sedimentation." He elaborates:

> As Taylor points out, there is always an element of creativity in linguistic articulation, and the appropriated articulation is not necessarily the same as the implicit sense that the process began with. Sometimes the self-definitions we adopt are self-consciously reformative. As time goes by, these once innovative self-definitions turn into routines and habits, they become re-sedimented and metamorphose into elements of the implicit background horizon of orientation. Thus, here we can refer to a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation as well as a dialectic of the implicit and the explicit.[351]

Articulation is thus the engine of change whereby agents both live in and simultaneously re-create and re-order the world within which they live.

Taylor's concept of "social imaginary"[352] displays the above-described dynamism between articulation and the background. He introduces this notion to show how various concepts and modes of shared self-understanding constitute the immediately perceived world of human action. In his words, the notion of a 'social imaginary' conceptualizes our "wider grasp of our whole predicament, how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, etc."[353] According to Taylor, it differs from a 'theory' in three respects. First, the former has broader means of transmission at its disposal. It isn't limited to simply conceptual articulations but also gets formed through "images, legends, stories, etc."[354] Second, social imaginaries have broader constituencies than theories, i.e., they provide the terms in which great numbers of people can share a world. By contrast, theories are often limited to the elite.[355] Finally, in Taylor's words, "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[356] Taylor points to the example of mass 'demonstrations' to show how some concepts

---

[350] Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Foundationalism?: Knowledge, Agency, and World" in *Heidegger, Coping, and Cognitive Science*, ed. Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 117.

[351] Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources,* 151-153, quote from p. 153. As Laitinen notes, "There is a hermeneutical circle, or dialectic, between the implicit ant the explicit" (164).

[352] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-176; He introduces this term in Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 167-168. The notion is developed most fully in Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004).

[353] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172-3.

[354] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-172.

[355] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

[356] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

are lived; that is to say, they are part of "the 'repertory' of collective actions at the disposal of a given group of society."[357]

Nevertheless, while theories are not social imaginaries, they can exert substantial enough influence on them to bring about large-scale change to the shared world of common ideas and practice. Theoretical notions, first born of philosophy, work their way into the popular self-understandings of a time-period and thus move from the realm of pure theory to that of the lived experience. Just think of how people experience their world in terms of 'rights' and engage in countless practices structured both directly and indirectly by this notion emerging from the modern natural law tradition.[358] Taylor describes the interplay of theory and social imaginaries as follows:

> What exactly is involved, when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary? Well for the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. And hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world, and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.[359]

Here we see a clear example of the kind of how certain kinds of articulations can destabilize and bring about radical change to the backgrounds that provide their context, i.e., the "dialectic of innovation and sedimentation," to use Arto Laitinen's insightful phrase. It doesn't end here. There is, as Taylor notes, a possibility of looping: "The new practice, with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modifications of theory, which in turn can inflect practice, and so on."[360]

Although Taylor's discussion of social imaginaries deals primarily with how certain political theories inform and change practice, there is no reason why a moral theory could not also transform human practice and thereby unsettle the "social imaginary" in which agents collectively live. Moral theory too is thus potentially part of the dynamic relationship between articulation and background. In this respect, Taylor could agree with Alasdair MacIntyre, who writes "A good deal of ordinary

---

[357] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173.
[358] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 175-6.
[359] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 175-6.
[360] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 176.

conversation and debate bears out the epigram that common sense is a graveyard of past

philosophies."[361] Indeed for Taylor, again like MacIntyre, we might see moral theory as itself an

articulation of our moral understanding that can in turn change it.[362]

## 3.3 The Background, Phronesis and Moral Theory

What are the implications of engaged agency for moral philosophy, specifically the viability

of modern moral theory? How does the above described background/foreground structure carry

over to the moral life, and what, if any, affect does this have on moral theory? Does this structure of

human agency impugn modern moral theory in any way? These are the questions I will attempt to

answer in this section. Our explicit beliefs, representations, and utterances, as we saw in the previous

section, rely on an implicit, unarticulated background for their intelligibility. This is no less true of

moral beliefs, concepts, principles, and judgments. These too always already take place against and

presuppose a background, which is itself infused by a sense of value. As Taylor puts it, "our

judgments of what to do take place in the context of a grasp of the good that is largely unarticulated.

It consists largely of background understanding."[363] This is not, of course, a new point. In one sense,

it the familiar Aristotelian argument that ethical judgment is uncodifiable, a point that has been

recently reiterated with great sophistication by authors like Martha Nussbaum and John McDowell.[364]

However, the background/foreground structure falling out of the Wittgenstein-Heidegger-Merleau-

Ponty derived notion of "engaged agency" provides Taylor with unique conceptual resources for re-

---

[361] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues, and Goods," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1992): 17.

[362] Mark Johnson drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre also sees moral theory as an articulation of a background tradition. Cf. Mark Johnson, *The Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 64. He quotes MacIntyre saying, "Moral philosophies are, before they are anything else, the explicit articulations of the claims of particular moralities to rational allegiance." Alasdair MacIntre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 268. What Taylor distinctively adds to this discussion is a sophisticated conception of articulation buttressed by a broader hermeneutically inflected philosophy.

[363] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 75.

[364] See Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," in *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), chapter 2 and John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), chapter 3.

articulating a version of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. A good summary of his

rendition is found in the following passage:

> We perceive or intuit that something is right. This is not different in a crucial respect from
> our perceiving something to be the case. The perception is possible only against a whole
> background. The background is a grasp we have on things, which can be in some degree
> articulated, but which remains largely inarticulated, and whose articulation would be an
> endless task. We can't give an exhaustive list of criteria in either case, because of this role of
> the background.[365]

The point is not merely that moral judgment presupposes a background of out-of-focus moral

knowledge, but that some of our moral knowledge consists of an ability to do things, which he likens

to tact. Taylor elaborates,

> What is moral understanding? To a large degree, it is a kind of know-how, like tact; for
> example, knowing how to treat someone with sympathy and consideration. A lot of moral
> understanding exists at the level of Bourdieu's *habitus*. And if you don't possess some
> capacities in one or other of these modes of know-how, you won't be able to do the right
> thing in certain circumstances: for instance, if you lack the tact of sympathy I just
> mentioned.[366]

Here we find thus a minimal defense of moral inarticulacy in the sense that some of our knowledge is

of essentially the inarticulate variety and this plays a presuppositional role in our more articulate

thinking.

Let me underscore that the point is not merely that some of our moral know-how happens

to be inarticulate. Taylor's claim is the stronger one that moral articulation is never over; it can never

be completed. Moral judgments *qua* articulations of the good have built-in limits. The reason here is a

variation on the theme covered above. Given that the background conditions enabling us to make

sense of explicit judgments far outstrip our capacity to articulate them, there will be structural limits

on how clear we can be about the good. Even when we do articulate the background involved in our

conception of the good, this too requires, as we stressed in our earlier discussion, the background.

This background awareness of the good, in Taylor's words, "can be articulated to some degree in

descriptions of the good, and this can be very important, both for our knowing what to do or be and

because it can move us to do or be it. But these descriptions are understood only in the context of

---

[365] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 61.
[366] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 62.

background understanding, acquired habits, and paradigms, which *can never be transcended or escaped*."[367] This means that we are condemned to be, at some level, necessarily inarticulate about the moral life. The structural limits of human understanding apply to moral judgments too. Call this *structural moral inarticulacy*.

If moral articulacy is in some sense impossible, does this undercut or mitigate Taylor's attack on contemporary moral theorists? After all, isn't his charge that modern moral philosophy makes us "inarticulate"? How does this criticism have any bite, if we are, by his own admission, necessarily morally inarticulate? It would be a mistake to infer that Taylor's recognition of structural moral inarticulacy impugns his attack on the "enforced inarticulacy" [368] of modern moral philosophy. The reason is that we are talking about two fundamentally different kinds of inarticulacy—one bad, one unavoidable. The two kinds of inarticulacy have fundamentally different sources. Structural inarticulacy is due to the reliance on awareness that goes beyond the particular articulation at hand. The kind of inarticulacy brought on by modern moral philosophy has to do with the limitations placed on interpretive resources.[369] We are barred from making claims about the good life, and thus our moral life suffers distortion. To put it another way, structural inarticulacy guarantees the need to keep the conversation going; enforced inarticulacy bans certain ways of expressing ourselves—or worse, certain topics of conversation.

Given that our explicit moral understanding (a) presupposes a background understanding and (b) this background cannot be ever articulated-away, so to speak, is this damaging to moral theory? Some anti-theorists have thought so. They have maintained that the incodifiability of the moral know-how captured in virtue poses insoluble problems for system-fixated moral theory.[370] Taylor himself has suggested the indispensability of phronetic judgment as a strike against the project

---

[367] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 75, italics mine.

[368] Charles Taylor, "A most peculiar institution," in *Mind, World, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 153.

[369] This point will be explored in detail in chapter 4.

[370] See Annette Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices" in *Postures of Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 218-220. This argument is reiterated in Stanley G. Clarke, "Anti-Theory in Ethics" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (July 1987): 237-244; see also Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, "Introduction: The Primacy of Moral Practice," in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservativism*, eds. Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson  (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1-25.

of constructing moral theories/moral codes.[371] But as several prominent defenders of theory have argued, the recognition of the "background" is not straightforwardly at odds with moral theory, even if we gloss 'theory' as requiring something like a decision procedure. [372] Their point is that such an algorithm might still presuppose an agent's ability both to recognize what is morally relevant and required. It would be absurd to maintain that application of a moral principle wouldn't rest on some kind of context-giving cultural and institutional awareness that goes beyond the decision procedure itself. The theory defenders dig in their feet. They tell us that it is perfectly consistent to maintain that even a moral theory *qua* moral decision making algorithm must itself rely on a background understanding in order to be successfully applied. Recognition of Taylorian engaged agency, if theory's apologists are right, does thus not count as a blow against moral decision procedures.

But this defense isn't wholly successful. If we grant (a) that a sizable chunk of moral knowledge exists in our ethical praxis and (b) that moral theory is structurally unable to spell this out in terms of the theory, then the theory itself loses the independence and authority accorded to it, at least on some views of theory.[373] It cannot plausibly be regarded as self-sufficient because it still rests on contextual moral knowledge that exists outside of the theory, as it were, and can never be appropriated by it. It follows that if our background understanding is corrupted, this corruption carries over to our application of the moral theory itself.[374] A theory that tells me not to inflict pain on others is worthless, if I'm not sensitive to the various ways in which I can hurt others.

While this may seem like a relatively modest point against moral theory, the full weight of this argument is felt when we recognize that we are not just talking about the conditions for applying

---

[371] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 704-705. Cf. Charles Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 28-30.

[372] See Barbara Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 73-93; Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), chapter 3, especially p. 43. Also see Onora O'Neill, "Principles and Practical Judgment," *The Hastings Center Report* 31 (July/August 2001), 15-23.

[373] While this may seem like a weak implication, it is important to note that it does undercut certain extreme positions like those that claim the application of moral theories are *sufficient* for correct moral judgments. For a sketch of various possible levels of authority claimed by moral theory see T.M. Scanlon, "The Aims and Authority of Moral Theory" *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 2-5.

[374] Barbara Herman acknowledges that moral failure can occur at two levels within the Kantian system—namely, at the level of moral perception (what she calls "rules of moral salience) or of moral assessment (deployment of the categorical imperative). See Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 89-90.

moral principles. Rather we are, in an important sense, talking about the very *meaning* of moral

principles themselves. The content of moral principles, Taylor's argument runs, is itself fleshed out

through praxis. He writes, "practice not only fulfills the rule, but also gives it *concrete shape* in particular

situations. Practice is, as it were, a continual interpretation and reinterpretation of *what the rule really

means*."[375] The picture of moral interpretation is thus not a one-way arrow running from a content-

loaded, yet general principle to concrete circumstance. Rather it sees a two-way relation between

theory and praxis. The meaning of the principle or theory itself is determined in the working out of

concrete, situational interpretations. The implication is that recognizing the foreground/background

structure and the perpetual process of articulation that flows from it, poses a more fundamental

challenge to moral theories than many of theory's defenders admit. In short, theories are dependent

on background awareness not only for their application but also for their very meaning, and this

exposes the radical insufficiency of moral theory. In virtue of the "engaged" character of our agency,

moral theory is caught up in a hermeneutic circle of sorts.

## 3.4 Articulation and Taylor's Expressivism

Thus far I have been attempting to spell out in greater detail what Taylor means by

"articulation" by looking at his critique of "the epistemological picture" and the view of "engaged

agency," which emerges from epistemology's ashes. As we have seen, his notion of articulation

follows from the "engaged" construal of agency, the claim that embodied coping and social practices

are the pre-conditions for explicit belief formation. Articulation is how we come to clarify, express,

and thereby sharpen our understanding of our implicit, engaged understanding of the world. But *how*

do we articulate the background? What is it that makes possible articulacy and more specifically,

moral articulacy? While Taylor's answer is far from one-dimensional, language plays an indispensable

role. For this reason, I want to approach these questions through Taylor's philosophy of language.

---

[375] Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," 178. Italics mine.

Taylor divides the history of philosophical reflection on language into two broad traditions: the "designative" and the "expressive" (what he also calls the "constitutive" or "Romantic").[376] Both designation and expression are important parts of meaningful language use, as Taylor notes, but these two traditions differ on which aspect is given priority. Simply put, the designative tradition accords priority to designation, while the expressive tradition grants primacy to expression.[377] The former tradition, the designative, includes such notable members as Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac.[378] In its original forms, this family of language theory explained meaning in terms of the act of picking things out by applying words to objects. In brief, "the meaning of a word is what it designates."[379] The originators of this school held "we could explain a sign or word having meaning by pointing to what it designates, in a broad sense, that is, what it can be used to refer to in the world, and what it can be used to say about that thing."[380] The focus here is on how language picks out and names objects in the world that existed prior to language. While such a simplistic picture was true of Locke, it hardly holds for those philosophers of language working in the wake of Frege and Wittgenstein.[381] Nevertheless, despite these advances in the philosophy of language, the "designative" family lives on, albeit "in a transposed form."[382] Two key assumptions constitute this family of theories, both old and new: (1) a focus on representation and (2) the adopted perspective of a spectator.[383] Taylor points to

---

[376] Although the terminology varies slightly, this distinction is found in all of his main essays on language. See Charles Taylor, "Language and Human Nature" and "Theories of Meaning," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), chapters 9 and 10; Charles Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," and "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," in *Philosophical Arguments*, chapters 5 and 6. For a great discussion of Taylor's philosophy of language see Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 75-86; Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), chapter 5. While both Smith and Redhead cover some of the same terrain that I do, we have very different aims. The unique objective of my discussion is first to bring Taylor's philosophy of language to bear on his notion of "articulation" and then to use this elucidated conception of "articulation" to illuminate his moral philosophy.

[377] Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 218-220.

[378] On the basis of this intellectual heritage Taylor talks about this view under the heading of "HLC theories." See Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology."

[379] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 250.

[380] Taylor, "Language and Human Meaning," 218.

[381] See Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 251-252.

[382] Taylor, "Introduction" in *Human Agency and Language*, 9.

[383] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 255. He adds that these two points are bound up with each other: "Seeing theory as observer's theory is another way of allowing the primacy of representation; for a theory also, on this view, should be representation of an independent reality" (255).

Quine/Davidson's starting point of a foreign interpreter as evidence for the lingering appeal of the designative view has in contemporary philosophy of language.[384]

The second tradition of language philosophy is called in Taylor's terminology the "expressivist" (sometimes also the "constitutive" or "Romantic") view. This conception, which stems from the work of Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, is notably developed in the twentieth century by Heidegger.[385] This view of language doesn't emphasize the power of language to *represent* the world, but rather the way in which language helps *express, disclose* and thereby *constitute* the world.[386] As Taylor puts it, "Language makes possible the *disclosure of the human world*. There is a *combination here of creation and discovery*, which is not easy to define."[387] Taylor draws deeply from this tradition in making sense of human capacities for culture, meaning, and ultimately morality.[388] I want to briefly trace how he develops this line of thought because it lays the groundwork for connecting Taylor's conception of articulation with his understanding of ethical agency.

In his early essay entitled "Theories of Meaning" Taylor sees three unique insights in the "expressivist" tradition of the philosophy of language, all of which have implications for how we think of 'articulation': language formulates our experience, it constitutes certain uniquely human significances, and it makes possible a shared, common world.[389] First, Taylor tells us language enables us to "formulate" or "articulate" our experience.[390] The term 'formulation' here is interchangeable with a very narrow sense of Taylor's concept of 'articulation,' a sense that is central to but only a part of the more expansive sense of 'articulation' found in Taylor's vast *oeuvre*. The shared idea behind these two terms is that language sharpens our intentional experience by providing it with, as it were, a center. In Taylor's words, "Finding an adequate articulation for what I want to say about these

---

[384] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 252-255, 281-282; Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 243.

[385] This historical lineage leads Taylor to refer to this tradition as "the triple-H theory." See Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 255-256; for Heidegger's place in the tradition see Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology."

[386] See Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 227-234; Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 256-263; Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," 101-112.

[387] Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, ix-x, italics mine.

[388] This comes out most clearly in Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, chapter 2. It is no surprise that Taylor concludes this essay by suggesting it is what Heidegger meant, even if he didn't put it in Taylor's clear prose.

[389] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 256-263.

[390] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 256-258.

matters *brings them into focus*. To find a description in this case is to identify a feature of the matter at hand and thereby to grasp its contour, to get a proper view of it."[391] Language, in other words, provides us a way of sketching the layout of a phenomena, a means of detailing the important points and relating them to one another. Taylor writes, "coming to articulate our sense of some matter is inseparable from coming to identify its features. It is these that our descriptions pick out; and having an articulated view of something is grasping how the different features are related."[392] Articulation thus involves two things: (1) it enables us to "focus" our attention on some feature of a situation and (2) "delimit" the object of our attention.[393]

This capacity to formulate or articulate our experience by finding a good way of putting something rests on a fundamental, albeit oft ignored ability. Taylor brings this out in his discussion of the neglected *Sturm und Drang* writer Johann Gottfried Herder.[394] It was Herder, Taylor tells us, who first set us on the right track by connecting linguistic capacity with reflective thought. Herder's big idea was that human language presupposes the ability to grasp something as a specific kind of thing. In a word, it presupposes 'reflection.'[395] This is what is special about human language use. Being able to grasp something as something of a certain kind brings into play normative considerations that govern language—namely, the ability to find an apt way of describing something. As Taylor puts it:

> Consider the gamut of activities, including disinterested scientific description articulating one's feelings, the evocation of a scene in verse, a novelist's description of a character. A metaphor someone coins is right, profound. There is a kind of 'getting it right' here. But in contrast to animal signaling, this can't be explained in terms of success in a task not itself linguistically defined.[396]

He contrasts this kind of correctness with instrumental success. Instead of thinking of success here as being able to bring about the desired outcome, as when an animal that gets a reward for making the right sound at the right time (Taylor's example), human language can be assessed in terms of its ability to aptly capture something in terms of language. Human language thus brings into play what

---

[391] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 257, italics mine.
[392] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 257.
[393] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 258.
[394] See Taylor, "The Importance of Herder."
[395] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 88; Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 228-230.
[396] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 84.

Taylor calls "the semantic dimension."[397] He describes this as follows: "To possess a word of human language is to have some sense that it's the right word, to be sensitive…to this issue of its irreducible rightness."[398] Human language introduces a sense of "rightness" that goes beyond getting the job done.

Despite Taylor's apparently crude distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental criteria for evaluating correct language, which may seem to be nothing more than a nod to the normativity of language, Taylor's appeal to Herder brings to light the way in which language can illuminate and shape human feeling. Taylor writes, "when I hit on the right word to articulate my feelings and acknowledge that I am motivated by envy, say, the term does its work because it is the right term."[399] It is an interesting fact that we can succeed or fail in finding the right expression for self-expression. This is the game-changer that prevents assimilating human language use to an instrumental criterion for success. Here the criterion for human language is one of articulacy. Taylor's approach to language underscores the romantic roots of an expressivist account of language; it brings *feeling* to the fore.[400] For Taylor a kind of "see-feel"[401] undergirds our ability to use language.

While Taylor draws our attention to the way in which certain ways of framing things can bring about greater clarity in self-understanding, he hardly advances a view of simply naming our emotions, slapping a label on a pre-existing emotional state, as it were. The romantic insight achieved by Herder, developed by Heidegger, and further articulated by Taylor is that language has the power to bring forth, and thus we cannot understand language as simply naming what is already there. But

---

[397] Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," 105.
[398] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 93.
[399] Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," 93.
[400] The Romantic roots of Taylor's position come out in Smith's discussion of Taylor's philosophy of language. He addresses these topics in a chapter entitled "The Romantic Legacy." See Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 75-86. Also see Colin Jager, "This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor's Romanticism" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010), 166-192. Taylor admits his affinities to Romanticism in his response to Jager's essay. He writes, "I'm a hopeless German romantic of the 1790s." Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age,* 320. Cf. Robert Brandom's distinction between "Romantic" or "Traditional Expressivism" and "Rational Expressivism." Taylor would fall here clearly on the Romantic side. Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 16-19.
[401] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 70.

articulation/formulation doesn't just find a fitting way of expressing our feelings, in an important sense it also makes them possible. It gives them their form; "language does not only serve to *depict* ourselves and the world, it also helps *constitute* our lives."[402]

What does it mean for language to *constitute* our lives? We can find two levels of linguistic constitution in Taylor's work: (a) linguistic resources sets the limits to the space of possible self/world descriptions, and (b) the act of characterizing oneself or one's feelings in a certain way shapes them in a certain way. The former concerns our linguistic repertory and the latter concerns what happens in particular acts of characterization. In considering these two levels of linguistic constitution I draw on a penetrating analysis put forward by Richard Moran.[403] On the first level, we find that language makes possible certain ways of self-understanding that don't pre-exist language. This is especially true with regard to feelings and emotions. Taylor writes:

> If language serves to express a new kind of awareness, then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things, an ability to describe them; it may also *open new ways of responding to things, of feeling*. If in expressing our thoughts about things we can come to have new thoughts, then *in expressing our feelings we can come to have transformed feeling*.[404]

As he adds elsewhere, "*Linguistic beings are capable of new feelings which affectively reflect their richer sense of their world*: not just anger, but indignation; not just desire, but love and admiration."[405] Language thus shapes the interpretive space within which we describe our lives, delimits the range of possibilities for interpretation. Richard Moran captures this point well:

> It is hard to deny, for example, that a shallow or impoverished vocabulary for emotional self-description makes for a shallow emotional life; and, conversely that richer conceptual resources make for correspondingly enriched possibilities of emotional response. A person whose conceptual universe of the emotions is limited to the two possibilities of feeling good and feeling not-so-good will certainly fail to be subject to (and not just fail to *notice*) the range of responses possible for some other person with the emotional vocabulary of Henry James.[406]

---

[402] Taylor, "Introduction," in *Human Agency and Language*, 10.

[403] See Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), chapter 2.

[404] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 97, italics mine. Also Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 232-234.

[405] Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," 105.

[406] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement*, 40-41; cf. Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources,* 30-31.

This tracks closely with Taylor's observation that an agent who has only two terms for love—'love' and 'lust'—will experience things differently than an agent with a more nuanced conceptual equiptment.[407] But language constitutes far more than just our emotions; it makes possible certain ways of being too:

> Certain ways of being, of feeling, of relating to each other are only possible given certain linguistic resources. Without a certain articulation of oneself and of the highest, it is neither possible to *be* a Christian ascetic, nor to *feel* that combination of one's own lack of worth and high calling…nor to be *part* of, say, a monastic order.[408]

It is the way in which language makes possible, i.e., brings into existence, certain meanings that captures the second major insight of the expressivist tradition. Otherwise put, language gives rise to certain uniquely human meanings and significances. This is the second distinctive feature of the expressivist tradition.[409]

While the constitutive dimension of language imposes constraints on possible self/world interpretation, these are neither total nor fixed. We can find our language to be lacking, not quite right, or shallow. These are all moments of experienced inarticulacy. We are not, however, stuck with our existing modes of description. For Taylor we can be linguistic innovators and develop novel ways of describing the world and ourselves.[410] Indeed, neither his historical project nor his account of practical reason would make no sense were this not the case that we can generate new modes of describing ourselves, our reality.[411]

The constitutive power of language occurs on a second level in Taylor's writing. There is a sense in which the very act of characterizing ourselves under a certain description constitutes our feelings and situations. How do we make sense of this level of self-constitution? In what sense could describing oneself in certain terms way make it the case? Now there is a limited sense in which a self-

---

[407] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 71-2.

[408] Taylor, "Introduction," in *Human Agency and Language*, 10.

[409] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 260-263.

[410] As he puts it, "A human being can always be original, can step beyond the limits of thought and vision of contemporaries, can even be quite misunderstood by them. But the drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some relation to the language and vision of others." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 37. Also see Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 37-42.

[411] We will discuss these features of Taylor's thought in greater detail in chapter 4.

interpretation could entail the truth of its claim. Moran has in mind a handful of cases of logical self-determination. Believing that one's marriage has failed constitutes the marriage as a failure. As Moran points out, "No marriage can be a happy or successful one if one of the partners sees it as a mistake or a trap."[412] The same thing is true of casting oneself as "mistrustful."[413] You can't really trust others, if you don't think you trust them. The same thing could be said about lacking confidence. If you don't think you are confident, you're not. This species of self-constituting interpretations, as Moran concedes, only works with a narrow range of cases—namely, those interpretations that negate a state that would require the opposite judgment to be true.[414]

In most cases self-interpretations do not guarantee their truth at all. As Moran notes, "it could be that someone's sophisticated vocabulary for self-interpretation coexists with, or even contributes to, chronic illusion on his part about his actual state of mind"[415] Nothing in Taylor's work commits him to the necessary truth of our self-interpretations. As he writes, "our self-(mis)understandings shape what we feel."[416] If even *mis*-interpretations can shape how an agent feels, then there is clearly a sense in which the constitutive power of language cannot be located in the truth of an agent's interpretation. Indeed, Taylor's conception of articulation builds in the possibility of interpretive progress, which is to say that an interpretation can be succeeded by a better, more insightful interpretation. This presupposes, in turn, that our self-interpretations can be wrong in some sense.

Even if we cannot generally understand the self-constituting character of self-interpretation in terms of the truth of the interpretation, there is, according to Moran, a weaker sense of self-constitution that applies far more pervasively. Construed holistically, even delusional self-

---

[412] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 44.

[413] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 45-46.

[414] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 46-47. He writes, "If there is, for such logical reasons, a self-fulfilling character to self-interpretations of this kind, we shouldn't expect it to apply to more than a special range of cases. These will be, roughly, 'partial' conditions (like ambivalence), which are defined as contrary of some 'absolute' state, which is defined so as to be incompatible with any compromising doubt about itself." (47)

[415] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 42.

[416] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 65.

interpretations are self-constituting in the sense that a correct interpretation would have to take into consideration the agent's delusional self-interpretation. He writes:

> A false conception of one's state can constitute a difference in its total character and still be false for all that. Someone may see his pride as sinful, but if there is no such thing as sin (really), then surely his conceiving of his pride this way cannot constitute it as such. Nonetheless, it will remain true that *the presence of this self-interpretation suffices for his pride to be of an essentially different nature from someone else's pride, or from his own pride before he came to see it that way*.[417]

He concludes,

> contrary to what is usually assumed, the hermeneutic privileging of self-interpretations (whether individual or social) does not require the assumption of their truth. Any outsider who wishes to understand or even to describe this person's pride at all accurately must include the fact that he interprets it in these terms, that he experiences and lives out his pride under these particular concepts.[418]

Moran's reading fits with Taylor's recognition that an agent can labor under a false or even demeaning self-conception.[419] It also fits with the tenor of Taylor's argument in "Self-Interpreting Animals," that naturalistic reduction of the human *Lebenswelt* fails because it ceases to make sense of the terms in which we understand ourselves.[420] It isn't the truth an interpretation that makes it self-constituting. Rather, any adequate account of an agent's life will have to take into consideration the interpretations in which she casts her feelings, self, and actions.

There is one final sense noted by Moran in which a self-interpretation might be self-constituting. Self-constitution might be better understood as a matter of deliberation, i.e., we constitute our feelings by deciding to feel a certain way. He writes, "When the articulation or interpretation of one's emotional state plays a role in the actual *formation* of that state, this will be because the interpretation is part of a deliberative inquiry about how to feel, how to respond."[421] In coming to an interpretation of ourselves, we are not just determining how we do, in fact, feel, but

---

[417] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 49.
[418] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 50.
[419] This is an assumption at play in Taylor's defense of the importance of (mis)recognition from other selves. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments*, chapter 12.
[420] See the discussion of this point in chapter 2 of this dissertation.
[421] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 58-59, italics in original.

rather how it is that we ought to feel.[422] Our interpretations of our emotions are thus self-constituting, Moran argues, in virtue of the well-known feature of emotions that they normally respond and change to fit with the beliefs we hold. Thus, the self-constituting character of our interpretations of our emotions is just the "sort of mutual responsiveness…psychological health would involve."[423]

What is striking about this formulation is that it seems to be at odds with Taylor's most common formulations, which emphasize self-*description* rather than *deliberation*. Consider Taylor's example of a burned-out office clerk contemplating whether or not she ought to leave for Nepal. She flips between two self-interpretations. In some moments, she views herself as needing be refreshed, needing to find herself again. Yet in still other moments, she sees herself as fleeing from her responsibility, failing to face up and confront her reality.[424] Here the emphasis falls on how to properly describe what is at stake in one's situation. Taylor writes, "an articulation purports to characterize a feeling; it is meant to be faithful to what it is that moves us. There is a getting it right and getting it wrong in this domain. Articulations are like interpretations in that they are attempts to make clearer the imports things have for us."[425] The "getting it right" here seems to refer not to making the right decision but more fundamentally properly describing one's situation: "I am trying to *see reality afresh* and form more adequate categories to *describe* it. To do this I am trying to open myself, use all of my deepest, unstructured sense of things in order to come to a new clarity."[426] Here we see the return of the descriptive metaphor and the root idea of articulation, i.e., openness to new ethical languages that express what we find important. An agent must *decide what to do*, but this *within is a space*

---

[422] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 58.

[423] Moran, *Authority and Estrangement,* 60.

[424] Taylor, "What is Human Agency," 26-27. A similar point, although considerably less developed, is found in Stuart Hampshire*, Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983), 120-121 and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 196.

[425] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 64-5. Elsewhere he notes, "Our attempts to formulate what we hold important must, like descriptions, strive to be faithful to something. But what they strive to be faithful to is not an independent object with a fixed degree and manner of evidence, but rather a *largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance*."[425] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 38.

[426] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 41-2, italics mine.

*constituted by how she sees/interprets the world.*[427] While Moran might be right that we *can* constitute

ourselves through deliberation, the stress in Taylor's work falls on the descriptive moment. The

power of language to constitute ourselves resides in its power to disclose a world within which an

agent decides rather than to constitute directly through decision *contra* Moran.

The third insight of the expressivists is the intersubjective, dialogical character of meaning,

i.e., the way it "enables us to put things in public space."[428] Taylor points to the way in which

expressions can make something accessible to many agents, e.g., when remarking on the weather

makes this a topic of shared conversation (his example): "now it is out there as a fact between us that

it is stifling in here. Language creates what one might call a public space, or a common vantage point

from which we survey the world together."[429] Taylor's point is that one of the peculiar features of

language (and symbolism in general) is how it enables "a certain coming together in a common act of

focus. The matter talked about is no longer just for me or for you, but for *us*."[430] This point is

particularly salient to our discussion of articulation because the act of articulating strives to express

things not simply for the single, solitary agent, but is itself essentially a public venture.

Articulation is holistic. Taylor follows the dominant line of 20th century linguistic theorizing

in holding that the meaning of any given word or expression depends on "the wider matrix of

language" that provides the overall semantic context for a concept or utterance.[431] This so-called

thesis of meaning holism ranges from Frege's point that a concept only has meaning with the context

of a sentence to the Wittgensteinian point that an utterance only has meaning in the context of a

*Sprachspiel*, which in turn only has meaning in a *Lebensform*. Taylor calls this cascading series of wholes

the "essential contexts" which make possible the meaning of the smaller units.[432] He draws on a

metaphor from Humboldt to express the holistic thesis: "To speak is to touch part of the web, and

---

[427] See chapter 4 of this dissertation for further discussion of this point in connection with Iris Murdoch's distinction between "vision" and "choice" as two master metaphors.
[428] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 259-260, quote from p. 259.
[429] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 259.
[430] Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 260.
[431] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 94.
[432] Charles Taylor, "Language Not Mysterious?" in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011), 41-42.

this makes the whole resonate."[433] The implication is that articulation always occurs (a) *within* the context of a broader "web" of meaning and (b) *through* references to other parts of that web, even if inexplicit.

What sets Taylor apart from other meaning holists is the place he gives to articulation. On Taylor's view of language the broadest of all these essential contexts without which we cannot make sense of meaning is articulation, what he calls the "disclosive dimension" of language.[434] While articulation permeates a wide range of other speech acts—think of when someone gives you an exhortation or advice using a parable or a metaphor—Taylor notes the limit case "where we use language, or some symbolic form to articulate and thus make accessible to us something—a feeling, a way of being, a possible meaning of things—without making any assertion at all."[435] The key point for Taylor is that the activity of articulation provides the context within which other linguistic activities can intelligibly take place. As he puts it:

> the factual-practical can't be self-sufficient. Our ability to operate with this family of language games depends on our operating in the whole range of symbolic forms. The articulative/disclosive is the essential background to our most immediately 'practical' discourse…even in those narrow areas where a stripped-down reason appropriately applies, as in natural science, or logic and mathematics, there is a continuing and…irremovable presence of the articulative-disclosive.[436]

Articulation is thus not just holistic in the sense that an articulation relies on various levels of context for its meaning. Articulation itself counts as the outer rim of Taylor's holistic conception of language. It constitutes the furthest reaches of an agent's world and infuses it with value.


## 3.5 Articulations of the Moral Life

The background/foreground structure springing from an "engaged" conception of agency conditions our moral understanding in a more profound way than simply revealing our necessary reliance on an inarticulate body of know-how. The key point is that our moral concepts, judgments,

---

[433] Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," 96.
[434] See Taylor, "Language Not Mysterious?" 42-3, 47-55, quote from p. 42.
[435] Taylor, "Language Not Mysterious?" 42.
[436] Taylor, "Language Not Mysterious?" 51.

and even theories ought to be seen through the prism of articulation, i.e., *qua* articulations.[437] The

substance of the moral life emerges in and through articulations. This is suggested by Taylor's

comment, "The moral life is also the object of articulations everywhere."[438] Our moral judgments,

utterances, and theories *are* most fundamentally articulations. And this, I am claiming, is not an

innocent turn of phrase. Viewing the ethical as something that *is articulated* has significant implications

for ethical theory. In this section I want to chase out these ramifications.

In addition to Taylor's account of "engaged agency," our discussion of Taylor's expressivism

gives us a further reason to see articulation as the means by which we constitute the moral life. If

language (understood loosely) plays a constitutive role in our self-understandings, the moral life will

hardly be exempt. Taylor takes this to imply that the idea that we can understand the ethical life

solely in virtue of human reason (understood instrumentally or in terms of logical consistency) is a

non-starter. Ethics like aesthetics and religion requires reference to the articulative-disclosive

dimension of language.[439] The reason lies in Taylor's moral psychology. If he is right that it is through

certain inarticulate feelings that various significances are disclosed to us, and that those feelings only

assume their form through linguistic expression, then it follows that articulation is indispensable to

understanding the ethical life. Indeed, ethical thinking is in large part, on Taylor's view, "a search for

the true form of these [moral] emotions."[440]

Once we accept that articulation is indispensable for the moral life, however, further

consequences follow for how we think of moral philosophy's place in the moral life. Theorists do not

have a monopoly on articulation. Indeed, in many cases, not only are they not good at it, not only do

they not try to do it, but they think we should not even be doing it. Accepting the two premises, (a)

that articulation assumes more forms than mere prose, which Taylor groups under the heading of

---

[437] Cf. Johnson, *The Moral Imagination,* 64; MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 268.

[438] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 62. He adds this articulation can never be simply a decision procedure: "We may be helped by some articulation, but it could never replace judgment by some algorithmic method" (62).

[439] Taylor, "Language Not Mysterious?" 43, 52-3.

[440] Taylor, "The Concept of a Person," 114.

Ernst Cassirer's term "symbolic forms,"[441] and also (b) that articulation is essential to ethical thought,

has the implication that it widens the scope of what we take to be genuine aids to moral reflection.

He writes, "we delude ourselves if we think that philosophical or critical language for these [ethical]

matters is somehow more hard-edged and more free from personal index than that of poets or

novelists. *The subject doesn't permit language which escapes personal resonance*."[442] Taylor's conception of

articulacy is wide enough to include not just philosophy but also literature, religious worship, and art.

Ruth Abbey calls this the distinction between "narrow" and "broad" forms of articulation.[443] By

emphasizing articulation, Taylor shifts the focus of the debate and opens up a more radical challenge

to moral theory. If articulation can assume many forms, why think we need moral philosophy at all?

This is the strong form of this challenge.[444] But even if we concede that philosophy reflection makes

unique contributions to the moral life, a focus on articulacy entails *at least* the weaker point that moral

theory doesn't have exclusive rights to the moral life. We still rely on a wider range of various kinds

of moral articulation. He writes, "Our moral consciousness is fed by models and paradigms: certain

exemplary people or stories (like the parable of the good Samaritan)."[445] These are quite

indispensable to the moral life. "Our moral understanding," he tells us, "would be crippled if we had

to do without this."[446] Contemporary theorists have often wrongly assumed that moral philosophy

can proceed in relative isolation from these other modes of moral world disclosure. Framing the

issue in terms of moral articulacy thus opens up a route for thinking of the indispensable importance

of, say, literature for moral philosophy.[447]

       That is to say, we cannot accept a view of moral theory that sees itself as the exclusive

legitimate means of articulating the moral life. Any moral philosophy aware of the phenomenon of

---

[441] See Taylor, "Language and Human Nature," 216; Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," 269.

[442] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512, italics mine.

[443] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 45.

[444] Here we see a point of connection between Taylor's critique and that found in Williams, who calls into question whether ethics is properly a matter for philosophy period. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), especially chapter 1.

[445] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 62.

[446] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 66.

[447] Other recent contemporary moral philosophers have defended the importance of literature for moral philosophy on other grounds and in other ways. See, for instance, Martha Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" in *Love's Knowledge*, 125-145.

moral articulacy must be open the unique and potentially indispensable disclosure of the moral life found in works of literature, accounts of exemplary human lives, and art. These articulations of the good are essential rather than incidental to understanding the moral life.

By way of conclusion, we can say that Taylor's conception of "engaged agency" and Romantic "expressivism" function as the indispensable horizons for making sense of his ubiquitous use of "articulation." These human capacities reveal (a) a perpetual, ineliminable reliance on an inarticulate background for the intelligibility of any explicitly formulated thought, a phenomenon I have called structural inarticulacy, and (b) a wide range of media by which we can articulate, give form to, and thereby constitute this background understanding.

These general structures of human life carry over to the moral life. In the above discussion I highlighted two ways in which our moral life bears the stamp of these broader characteristics of agency and language. First, the moral life must be understood in light of the broader phenomenon of structural inarticulacy. This means that the articulate bits of moral life, i.e., our moral judgments, principles, utterances, and even moral theories, rely on an inarticulate moral know-how, which Taylor likens to tact. While some moral theorists have recognized this point, they underestimate the impact of this concession. The point isn't just that we need to be contextually sensitive in our application to, say, general moral principles, but that the very content of these articulate bits are derived from an understanding that far outstrips possible articulation. This means that moral reflection is necessarily a perpetually interpretive matter. And moral theory cannot be thought of as self-sufficient.

Second, once we accept the central place articulation occupies in human life, we come to see the moral life as something that is articulated. By orienting the discussion of morality around the notion of articulation, Taylor introduces a seemingly subtle shift with not so subtle consequences. The question becomes how do we best articulate the moral life? And 'moral theory' ceases to be the only plausible or even best answer. Indeed, Taylor suggests that a wide range of forms of articulation are necessary for the moral life, including that often overlooked role of inspiring moral agents in their

pursuit of the good. Moral theory thus ceases not only to be a self-sufficient means of addressing

moral problems, but it also loses its exclusive authority often attributed to it by theory's defenders.

**Chapter 4: Taylor's Critique of Procedural Moral Theory I:**

**Substantive Ethical Dialogue and the Holism of Significance**

Like other anti-theorists, Taylor criticizes the idea that moral theory can arrive at an ultimate principle for determining which acts are morally right ones. He objects to the idea that we can coherently isolate a moral decision procedure from our broader understanding of the good. Unlike his fellow critics, however, Taylor's critique of modern moral theory draws its force from its distinctively hermeneutical conception of ethical life. In this chapter I will offer an interpretation of what I'm calling Taylor's strong reading of ethical holism. Just as we can only understand the meaning of a part in terms of the whole in which it is located, the significance of morality can only make sense in terms of its embeddedness in a broader conception of the good. Call this the *holism of significance*. As a consequence, the reductionistic character of contemporary theories lapse into "inarticulacy" in virtue of severing moral obligations from the broader conceptual home in which they make sense. This provides a fundamental reason why can't we adopt a "division of labor" approach like that advocated by Will Kymlicka and Jürgen Habermas where morality is treated independently of the good life.[448]

**4.1 Procedural and Substantive Ethics**

Over the past four decades Charles Taylor has launched a sustained attack on modern moral philosophy. Like many of his fellow critics, he takes issue with contemporary theory's attempt to reduce ethical thinking to a singular type of concern—namely, moral obligation.[449] This leads him to embrace the picture of moral theory as attempting to arrive at (ideally) a singular criterion for picking out our moral duties, what is often referred to as a 'decision-procedure.' In contrast to his sometime

---

[448] Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 170; Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 3-4.
[449] See also Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), especially chapter 10.

allies, however, Taylor's account stresses the eclipse of the good as the root cause of the distortions plaguing modern moral theory.[450] The idea of arriving at a moral decision procedure is implausible, on his view, precisely because it fails to appreciate the central place occupied by 'the good' in the moral life. In order to foreground this issue, Taylor divides moral philosophy into two basic approaches to ethics: the "procedural" and the "substantive."[451] The "procedural" version of moral thinking exhibits the vice of trying to pick out an ultimate moral criterion, but this rests on deeper assumptions, which Taylor tries to bring to light with his procedural/substantive juxtaposition. In this section I want to unpack this distinction in order to better understand both the *target* of Taylor's critique as well as a *way beyond* these supposedly problematic ways of construing moral thinking.

The distinction between procedural and substantive versions of moral theory tracks, according to Taylor, a more fundamental distinction between substantive and procedural conceptions of practical rationality. He wants to mark a fundamental break between modern and pre-modern ways of ethical thinking, one that "pits utilitarianism and Kantianism against Aristotle and Plato."[452] He describes this difference as follows:

> I call a notion of reason *substantive* where we judge the rationality of agents or their thoughts and feelings in substantive terms. This means that the criterion for rationality is that one get it right…By contrast, a *procedural* notion of reason breaks this connection. The rationality of an agent or his thought is judged by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct. Good thinking is defined procedurally.[453]

The substantive conception, in contrast to the procedural, reposes on the criterion that one "get it right." This criterion brings into play "substantive terms" exemplified by our virtue/vice vocabularies in which ethical evaluations are couched. But what does it mean to "get it right" in regard to practical reasoning? And what kind of connection does "getting it right" have to substantive ethical concepts?

---

[450] Fellow virtue theorist Alasdair MacIntyre makes a similar claim regarding the need to conceive of morality in terms of the good. Compare with Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Privatization of Good: An Inaugural Lecture," *Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 344-361.

[451] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 85-86; Charles Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," in *After MacIntyre,* ed., John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 19, 27-28.

[452] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 26.

[453] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 85-86, italics mine.

It appears to be, at least at one level, an issue of moral judgment. This is suggested by the following

comment:

> Practical reason was understood by the ancients substantively. To be rational was to have the correct vision, or in the case of Aristotle's *phronesis*, an accurate power of moral discrimination. But once we sideline a sense or vision of the good and consider it irrelevant to moral thinking, then our notion of practical reasoning has to be procedural. The excellence of practical reasoning is defined in terms of a certain style, method, or procedure of thought. For the utilitarians, rationality is maximizing calculation. *Zweckrationalität* is the crucial form. For the Kantians the definitive procedure of practical reason is that of universalization.[454]

But this way of characterizing the crucial difference between pre-modern and modern thinking fails

to give us a sharp criterion. After all, surely procedural theories, in some sense, aim to get things

right. Why couldn't procedural theories also employ substantive moral concepts? Indeed, as

contemporary neo-Kantian theorist Barbara Herman has shown with great subtlety and

sophistication, Kantian moral theory, the poster child of procedural ethics, requires refined moral

judgment couched in substantive ethical terms in order to make sense.[455] Even the formal procedure

of the categorical imperative still has to be applied to concrete contexts. Good Kantian agents need

to "get it right" in matters of concrete judgment just as much as the Aristotelian *phronimos*, and this

requires drawing on substantive ethical notions, at some level.[456]

While modern conceptions of practical reason cannot do without adequate accounts of

moral judgment, the key distinction Taylor is attempting to articulate goes beyond "getting it right" in

the details of individual judgments. When Taylor talks about "getting it right," he is suggesting the

much stronger notion that practical reason is responsible to something that determines what counts

as good and bad reasons for action. He writes:

---

[454] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 86.

[455] See Barbara Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), chapter 4.

[456] For this reason Herman has recourse to what she calls "rules of moral salience." She writes, "It is useful to think of the moral knowledge needed by Kantian agents (prior to making moral judgments) as knowledge of a kind of moral rule. Let us call them 'rules of moral salience.' Acquired as elements in a moral education, they structure an agent's perception of his situation so that what he perceives is a world with moral features. They enable him to pick out those elements of his circumstances or of his proposed actions that require moral attention." Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 77. We will explore this attempted incorporation of substantive moral notions within the broader framework of a moral theory in chapter 6.

> To make practical reason substantive implies that practical wisdom is a matter of *seeing an order* which in some sense is in nature. This order determines what ought to be done. To reverse this and give primacy to the agent's desires or his will, while still wanting to give value to practical reason, you have to redefine this in procedural terms. If the right thing to do still has to be understood as what is rationally justifiable, then the justification has to be procedural. It can't be defined by the particular outcome, but by the way in which the outcome is arrived at.[457]

Getting it right makes essential reference "an order" to which our moral understanding is in some sense responsible. It is this "order" that serves as the touchstone for ethical reflection. Taylor's notion of substantive practical reason thus incorporates an essential reference to some kind of moral realism. How do we make sense of this "order" in reference to which we make moral judgments?

An instructive parallel to Taylor's distinction between "procedural" and "substantive" can be found in his teacher Iris Murdoch's distinction between "choice" and "vision" as two structuring metaphors for the moral life.[458] Her distinction, I want to suggest, foreshadows the procedural/substantive opposition in Taylor and illuminates the point in making the distinction. On Murdoch's view, the moral philosophy prevailing in modernity starts out from the picture of a free agent occupying a value neutral world. Moral constrains come not from the world but from the agent's own choices. The centerpiece of moral thinking, on this construal, is an agent's free *choice* of moral principle which binds the agent's will. In contrast to this picture, we can see the ethical life as essentially a matter of *vision*. Here the focus is our "attention" to a value-charged world. The emphasis falls not on *deciding* what to do but *looking* more closely, more lovingly at the world. While Murdoch's realism might strike us as naïve, it is hardly so. For her moral reality is found in concrete others, and is hardly a brute given.[459] Seeing this moral reality doesn't just happen; it requires us to struggle beyond the self-induced delusions to correctly apprehend moral reality. It is, in her famous

---

[457] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 86, italics mine.

[458] Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 30 (1956): 32-58. This picture is further elaborated in Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971). Other commentators have noted connections between Murdoch and Taylor. See Fergus Kerr, "Charles Taylor's Moral Ontology of the Self," in *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 138-9; Janet Martin Soskice, "Love and Attention," in *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 7-12.

[459] For an astute development of Murdoch's view see Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), chapter 2. As Blum describes the center-point of the Murdochian view, "The moral task is not a matter of finding universalizable reasons or principles of action, but of getting oneself to attend to the reality of individual other persons" (12).

phrase, "the fat relentless ego,"[460] which poses a perpetual challenge to seeing clearly. Correct moral

vision requires inner work done by the moral agent in order to see concrete others through layers of

comforting, self-induced delusion. How we see and describe the world is not a morally neutral matter

as it shapes the space within which we deliberate, choose, and act. She writes,

> I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the sense of 'see' which implies that clear
> vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. If we ignore the prior work of
> attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify
> freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we
> consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how
> imperceptibly it builds up structures of value around us, we shall not be surprised that at
> crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over…the exercise of
> our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose
> leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something
> that goes on continuously, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of
> explicit moral choices.[461]

The implication is that we cannot simply talk about moral choice and prescribe guidelines for

choosing correctly because this neglects an essential pre-condition for making choices—namely, how

an agent *sees* her situation.[462] Murdoch argues for the priority of vision over choice, and vision

incorporates its own hermeneutical moment. We might say that for the Murdochian agent

deliberation takes place in a field constituted by the ongoing interpretation at work in her struggle to

see the world clearly.

Murdoch's choice/vision distinction illuminates Taylor's procedural/substantive distinction

on at least three levels. (1) It reveals how certain meta-ethical assumptions shape the content of our

moral thinking.[463] It is because the world is value neutral that the self must choose its own moral

principles or construct its own moral procedures. Once the world is seen as infused with moral value,

it makes sense to focus on correctly seeing, describing, and interpreting it—a point shared by both

Taylor and Murdoch. Even Taylor's language of "*seeing* an order" mentioned above reiterates the

---

[460] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51. As she puts it elsewhere, " 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (91).

[461] Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971), 35-6, italics in original.

[462] Cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 196.

[463] The claim that meta-ethics has implications for the content of moral thinking has been noted by other theorists. See T.M. Scanlon, "Moral Theory: Understanding and Disagreement," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (June 1995): 346; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* 73-4; cf. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518.

Platonic visual metaphors prominent in Murdoch's work. This brings us to the second point. (2) Despite having different moral psychologies, both thinkers stress that ethical deliberation occurs within a space shaped by our moral interpretation. Where vision for Murdoch "builds up structures of value" within which agents deliberate, Taylor's notion of articulation plays an essentially similar role in constituting the "moral space"[464] of practical deliberation. Agents only deliberate within the spaces constructed through attention (Murdoch) or articulation (Taylor), i.e., deliberation presupposes terms in which an agents understands her situation. Both thinkers focus on this oft-neglected yet logically prior moment of vision/articulation/interpretation. In order to decide what to do, one has to have a sense of what one could do. (3) This is connected to the further point that both Murdochian "vision" and Taylorian "articulation" draw on our richest, thickest moral language, what Murdoch will call "secondary moral words" like 'bumptious' (her example) for construing our selves and our world.[465] Thick ethical language, what Taylor calls "qualitative distinctions,"[466] according to both thinkers, is indispensable to seeing/describing/interpreting moral reality in a way crystallizes what is at stake. In these three ways, the parallel between the metaphors of choice and vision found in Murdoch's work clarifies the point underlying Taylor's distinction. The basic idea is that belief in a moral order makes a difference to how once conceives of practical reasoning by orienting an agent's moral vision.

How does the "order" of the good orient moral thinking? And conversely, how does proceduralism break from this? Here we can take a cue from Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut. Neo-Aristotelians stand opposed to both neo-Kantians and neo-Humeans, on their view, in holding that that "what *makes* it rational to choose an action is that it is good—it is an appropriate object of rational choice *because* it is good—whereas for Kantian and neo-Humean constructivists, the converse

---

[464] This term comes from Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2.

[465] Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 22. See also Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch" in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 43-50; In this connection also see Cora Diamond, "Losing Our Concepts," *Ethics* 98 (January 1988): 255-277. The term "thick" comes from Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 140.

[466] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 19, 21-24.

relation holds."[467]  The issue is whether the rational or the good is prior. They continue, "The distinctively Aristotelian approach to the theory of practical reason, then, is to begin with an independent account of the conditions under which actions are good, and to derive from this an account of practical rationality."[468] This description gets at the core difference, I think, between Taylor's conception of substantive and procedural versions of practical reason. The substantive view of practical reasoning lets the good determine what counts as a good reason for action, while the procedural view sets up an independent criterion for practical rationality, one independent of the good. This criterion for practical rationality lays the groundwork for seeing moral theory as ideally culminating in a decision procedure. The criterion for procedural practical rationality simply is the criterion for moral action. By contrast, if the good is logically prior to practical rationality, we will not find a 'decision procedure' insofar as the good is not simple. As we shall see, Taylor holds precisely a pluralistic reading of the good.

## 4.2 Recovering a Moral Order in a Post-Teleological Age?

But this gloss on the substantive/procedural distinction still leaves us with deep questions. Most fundamentally, where does "the good" come from? What is this "order" to which Taylor appeals? Accounts of the baleful effects of the decline of a teleological cosmos on ethical thought are now well known. Alasdair MacIntyre, perhaps the most famous storyteller in this genre, has traced the origins of the is/ought split and the rise of an "emotivist" culture to the eclipse of a teleologically organized world. Absent ends given by Nature, modern moral theories ultimately collapse, he argues, into arbitrary assertions of power.[469] Bernard Williams, who by no means longs for a return to the Aristotelian cosmos, has reached markedly similar conclusions regarding the prospects for ethical

---

[467] Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, "Introduction," in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, eds. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1-27, quote from p. 13.
[468] Cullity and Gaut, "Introduction," 13.
[469] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984)

philosophy in a post-teleological world.[470] Without the Aristotelian assumption of a distinctive *telos*

for human life, the actualization of human potentiality can take on a wide variety of

incommensurable forms. Consequently, human nature loses any unique connection with the moral

life. He writes:

> Aristotle saw a certain kind of ethical, cultural, and indeed political life as a harmonious
> culmination of human potentialities, recoverable from an absolute understanding of nature.
> We have no reason to believe in that. Once we lose the belief, however, a gap opens
> between the agent's perspective and the outside view…the agent's perspective is only one of
> many that are equally compatible with human nature, all open to various conflicts within
> themselves and with other cultural aims.[471]

The loss of a teleological world represents a seismic shift in the intellectual terrain of the western

world and, as the writings of MacIntyre and Williams attest, its tremors are still being felt in

philosophical ethics.[472]

For reasons of this kind, Taylor's attempt to articulate a substantive conception of practical

reason responsive to some kind of moral "order" in a post-teleological age is fraught with problems.

Indeed, the resurrection of such an order might come across as simply an episode of wishful

thinking. What conception of the good is substantial enough to anchor practical reason and yet avoid

being simply an instance of what Williams's calls "ethical nostalgia"?[473] Where does the moral

"order" necessary for orienting practical reason come from? Above all, how could we return to a rich

enough view of human nature to ground any moral theory in the modern age? Garrett Cullity and

Berys Gaus express the basic problem well: "A fundamental task for Aristotelians…is to give a

compelling defense of the attribution of an *ergon* to human beings, on which the Aristotelian

conception of practical reason depends."[474] Taylor is well aware of these problems. Such worries

surrounding the incredible nature of the good life have the effect of pushing many theorists towards

proceduralism. In his words, "A theory of ethics that takes as its basic concept a notion of the human

---

[470] See, for instance, Bernard Williams, "Modernity and the Substance of Ethical Life," in *In the Beginning was the Deed*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 40-51.

[471] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 52.

[472] I'm grateful to conversations with David McPherson on this topic.

[473] Williams, "Modernity and the Substance of Ethical Life" 41-44.

[474] Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, "Introduction," in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, eds. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 15.

good seems to presuppose metaphysical concepts that we can no longer justify, like that of a

normative 'nature.' An ethic founded on rules or procedures is thought not to share this

difficulty."[475]

Those committed to rehabilitating a substantive conception of practical reason in a post-

teleological age have options. Roughly speaking, we can identify two main strategies for establishing a

conception of the good life on which to build a neo-Aristotelian account.[476] The first line of

argument seeks to find a weak version of moral "order" and with it a conception of the human good

in a conception of human beings *qua* biological organisms. The idea here is that even if we cannot

recover Aristotle's metaphysics, we can still go a long way in articulating a conception of human

flourishing empirically. An example of this strategy can be found in the writings of the late Philippa

Foot. She writes, for instance, "To determine what is goodness and what defect of character,

disposition and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other

words, what kind of living thing a human being is."[477] On this conception, the "order," which sets

the standard for practical thinking, is a post-teleological conception of human nature. Such an

approach would identify virtues without it human beings would not be able to form the cooperative

groups and networks that enable them to meet their basic needs as well as develop human culture. As

Foot observes:

> Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able
> to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love
> and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations
> with neighbors. They also need codes of conduct. And how could they have all these things
> without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience?[478]

These observations regarding the character of human flourishing lead Foot to ask, "Why then should

there be surprise at the general suggestion that the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be

---

[475] Charles Taylor, "The Motivation behind a Procedural Ethics," *Kant and Political Philosophy*, eds. Ronald Beiner and William James Booth (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 347.
[476] These correspond roughly to the two versions of naturalism discussed in See John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism" in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), 167-197.
[477] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 51.
[478] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* 44-45.

determined by quite general facts about human beings?"[479] We come to our conception of morality

via an idea of what it means for humans to live well, and this is explained in terms of common

features of human nature, understood in a metaphysically deflated manner. Ethics is grounded in

what we need to survive as rational, social creatures with a certain biological make-up. In Foot's

words, "To flourish is here to instantiate the life form of that species, and to know whether an

individual is or is not as it should be, one must know the life form of the species."[480]

But is this substantial enough to serve as the ground for a conception of practical reason?[481]

Even within the naturalist camp, there are naysayers. As Bernard Williams and Stuart Hampshire

have stressed, these strategies understate the cultural dimension of human life. That is to say, our

biological nature significantly "underdetermines" the ethical life.[482] Too many different ways of life

are consistent with our good *qua* biological organism.[483] This means, these thinkers conclude, that

appeal to our brute biological nature fails to provide much guidance when it comes to ethical

questions. Thus, while a moral theory may be able to gain traction by appealing to those minimal

virtues needed to keep a society going, it can't get very far and will culminate in an unsatisfactory

account of the human good. Otherwise put, human nature is just too versatile. Too many different

---

[479] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 45.

[480] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 91.

[481] It should be noted that Taylor thinks such an account can help us understand our evaluative vocabularies, but it alone is insufficient without the "vision of the good" lurking behind an ethical vocabulary. For this we must go beyond our common biological human nature. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 54-56. For a critique of such naturalistically inclined versions of neo-Aristotelianism from a Taylorian perspective see David MacPherson, "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 627-654.

[482] See Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983), chapter 7. Hampshire writes, "human nature, conceived in terms of common human needs and capacities, always underdetermines a way of life, and underdetermines an order of priority among virtues, and therefore underdetermines the moral prohibitions and injunctions that support a way of life" (155) Also see and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 52, 153. With regard to theories of human nature he writes, "It is probable that any such considerations will radically underdetermine the ethical options even in a given social situation…there are many and various forms of human excellence which will not all fit together into one harmonious whole, so any determinate ethical outlook is going to represent some kind of specialization of human possibilities" (153). Also see Bernard Williams, "Truth in Ethics," in *Truth in Ethics*, ed. Brad Hooker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 33-34.

[483] This is the pessimistic flipside of the optimistic relativism expressed by the "Duke Naturalists," which was discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation. See, for instance, Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong, "Naturalizing Ethics" in *Moral Psychology Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 17-19; also see Owen Flanagan, "Ethics Naturalized: Ethics as Human Ecology," in *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics*, eds. Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 19-44.

ethical codes and considerable injustice are compatible with our biology. Despite his pessimism, however, Williams does concede this kind of approach "is at any rate a comprehensible project, and I believe it represents *the only intelligible form* of ethical objectivity at the reflective level."[484] Nevertheless, this point remains continuous with Williams's rather gloomy comments concerning doing ethical philosophy in a post-teleological world—namely, there seems to be no substantial link between human nature and the moral life. Saintliness, to put the point rather loosely, is just one way to actualize human potentiality.

Some defenders of the neo-Aristotelian enterprise have taken issue with the philosophical presuppositions of Williams's pessimism.[485] Specifically, they call into question his premise that we, unlike Aristotle, cannot ground ethics in a conception of human nature because we, again unlike Aristotle, have no access to a moral order outside of human experience and culture that could serve as the relevant anchor. They hold that the ethical "order" available to Aristotle was never lost because it was never conceived the way Williams presents it. Rather, as these critics maintain, such a reading anachronistically reads modern concerns into Aristotle's writings. McDowell writes,

> Williams's reading is a historical monstrosity; it attributes to Aristotle a felt need for foundations, and a conception of nature as where the foundations must be, that make sense only as a product of modern philosophy, and then represents him as trying to satisfy the need with an archaic picture of nature. According to Williams, modernity has lost a foundation for ethics that Aristotle was still able to believe in. But what has happened to modernity is rather that it has fallen into a temptation, which we can escape, to wish for a foundation for ethics of a sort that it never occurred to Aristotle to supply it with.[486]

---

484 See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 153-155, quote from p. 153. Later He revises his opinion slightly and describes the neo-Aristotelian approach as "the only colourable attempt to provide a foundation for ethics." He clarifies the use of 'colourable' as follows: "I choose that adjective in order to register a couple of distinctions. I do not mean that it is the only intelligible such attempt. I think that Kant's is intelligible, except to the extent that it is not—that is to say, to the extent that Kant himself admitted that, resting on the theory of noumenal freedom, it was not. Nor do I mean that it is uniquely plausible, in the sense that there is a lot, but not enough, to be said for it. On the contrary, I am inclined to think that in its original form it simply could not, now, be acceptable. The point is rather that it uses, in its attempt, the kind of material that one needs to consider arriving at any sensible view of the status of ethics, namely the richest account available of human powers and social arrangements…if reflection on Aristotle can give us both an idea of what such a foundation might have been like, and of why it is not available, we have a better sense of what we have not got, and of why we might have wanted it." Bernard Williams, "Replies," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 201.
485 Williams and McDowell are discussed in this connection in Cullity and Gaut, "Introduction," 15-16.
486 McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 195.

Martha Nussbaum criticizes Williams for essentially the same point. In contrast to his reading of Aristotle, she writes, "Nature comes into the ethical enterprise…*not as an external fixed point*, but as a *humanly experienced context for human lives*, evolving in history, yet relatively constant, presenting certain possibilities and foreclosing others, our sphere of hope and finitude."[487] Both McDowell and Nussbaum agree that the eclipse of a teleologically ordered cosmos doesn't pose a death knell blow to the project of a neo-Aristotelian ethic. Williams's interpretation misplaces the issue.

These thinkers go on to argue that neo-Aristotelian thought avoids the mistake, which Williams attributes to it, for it need not buy into the idea of an "external" foundation for ethical thinking. Rather Nussbaum and McDowell articulate positions in which the human good is understood from within the experience of an acculturated moral agent. As McDowell puts it, practical reason, in contrast to the prevailing ideology of modern science, operates according to "its own lights."[488] The driving idea behind such an internal strategy of rehabilitating neo-Aristotelian substantive reason is that "we can stop supposing the rationality of virtue needs a foundation outside the formed evaluative outlook of a virtuous person."[489] Martha Nussbaum describes the following alternative to Williams's pessimistic reading of Aristotle:

> Heraclitus said, 'You would not find out the boundaries of the soul, even if you should travel along every path: so deep is its account.' *The idea of an ongoing journeying and an ever deeper searching into ourselves is appropriate as an image of the Aristotelian search for human nature.* For what is proposed here is a scrutiny that seeks out, among our evaluative judgments, the ones that are the deepest and most indispensable over time having define themselves to themselves, through the play of the story-making imagination and in countless other activities of self-expression and self-perpetuation. Such a search is truly unending, since, as Heraclitus elsewhere reminds us, the story of human life is 'ever-flowing' in history, and the soul has a way of 'increasing' its own logos. Such a logos may seem too elusive, too open-ended, to serve as a foundation—if what one wants form a foundation is a once-for-all hard-edged solution to matters that actual human communities find perplexing. The Aristotelians claim, however, that no other sort of foundation is truly deep or truly pertinent…*It is only if it remains rooted in the human and the ethical that our search can be about, and towards, the human soul— that is, about what is deepest and most essential about human living.*[490]

Elsewhere she adds,

---

[487] Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, 120-121, italics mine.
[488] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 187.
[489] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 173-4.
[490] Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," 123-124, italics mine.

> We do not have a bedrock of completely uninterpreted 'given' data, but we do have nuclei of experience around which the constructions of different societies proceed. There is no Archimedean point here, and no pure access to unsullied 'nature'—even, here, human nature—as it is in and of itself. There is just human life as it is lived. But in life as it is lived, we do find a family of experiences, clustering around certain foci, which can provide reasonable starting points for cross-cultural reflection.[491]

The key point shared by both McDowell and Nussbaum is that we ought to understand human virtue and flourishing through an already evaluative lens. The neo-Aristotelian perspective is found within culture, i.e., within an already evaluative perspective. Confidence in our moral evaluations doesn't require grounding in an external, non-evaluative perspective, the kind of thing Williams thought Aristotle thought we had. We shouldn't feel like we're missing something we don't actually need.

The kind of neo-Aristotelian approach staked out by McDowell and Nussbaum points us in the right direction toward understanding Taylor's own treatment of the issue. He starts from the position that the decline of a teleologically ordered understanding of the natural world doesn't itself entail that we can't understand human ethical life in roughly Aristotelian terms. In his words, "The progress of science may have refuted Aristotle's physics and his biology, but it does not rule out thinking of ethics in terms of tele, or, other similar concepts. The shift in ethical outlook is underdetermined by the scientific change."[492] Indeed, Taylor maintains that moral theories do rest on a conception of the good life that lies behind their moral theory, even if the theory itself cannot fess up to its deeper commitments and motivations.[493] This is one of the basic senses in which modern moral theory is "inarticulate," i.e., it doesn't recognize its own reliance on a view of the human good that orients its moral thinking.[494] The reason Taylor can make these claims is because he thinks that the good life isn't simply given to us by nature, as it were, but is itself something articulated from

---

[491] Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues" in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 49.
[492] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 20. As he puts it elsewhere, "The notion that human beings have something like a telos *qua* human can be separated from the thesis that everything in nature belongs to some class or other, whose behavior is explained by some Form or Idea. Because we no longer explain the movement of stars and stones teleologically does not mean that we cannot explain humans in these terms" (17).
[493] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 22; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 504.
[494] See the discussion in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

within the human, ethical standpoint. It is, as we discussed in chapter two, within human self-interpretation that Taylor locates our "access" to the good life.[495] And human interpretation's dependence on language means that it necessarily involves elements of both "discovery" as well as "creation."[496] In this regard, he is aligned with McDowell and Nussbaum *contra* Williams that we can speak intelligibly of the good life even in a post-teleological cosmos.

Taylor sees the good life as grounded within a non-neutral, ethical standpoint rather than on some external cosmos-guaranteed account of human nature. He offers us, in Jürgen Habermas's words a "postmetaphysical ethics of the good."[497] The depth or novelty of Taylor's position comes to light when we consider how the rich resources of philosophical hermeneutics employed in his modern re-articulation of the Aristotelian project.[498] This is reflected in his own account of the "order" that orients practical reasoning. While Taylor is a moral realist of sorts, he distinguishes himself both from the kind of moral realism that postulates an independent realm of moral facts as well as an anti-realist position that sees moral values as mere "projections" on a world inherently devoid of value. He stakes out a "third alternative between Platonism and projectivism" that owes more to Rilke and Heidegger than Plato or any other pre-modern figure.[499] The order of the good that serves as the essential touchstone of practical reason stems from our "best self-interpretation." He writes:

> It is widely thought that no constitutive good could have such a fragile ontological foundation as this, a niche *simply in our best self-interpretation*. Unless it is grounded in the nature

---

[495] See Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals."
[496] Cf. Taylor's remark that "Language makes possible the *disclosure of the human world*. There is a *combination here of creation and discovery*, which is not easy to define." Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) ix-x, italics mine.
[497] Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on Discourse Ethics," in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 20.
[498] On the idea that Taylor is a *modern* Aristotelian see Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 33; Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002), 101.
[499] Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 209-211, quotation from p. 210. Taylor's realism between Platonism and projectivism has drawn fire from both directions. See Michael Rosen, "Must We Return to Moral Realism?" *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 183-194; Stephen R.L. Clark, "Taylor's Waking Dream: No One's Reply," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 195-215; for Taylor's defense of his "third alternative" see Charles Taylor, "Comments and Replies," Inquiry 34 (1991): 245-249. For a sophisticated attempt to defend a Taylorian conception of moral realism without appeal to his notions of 'constitutive goods' or 'moral sources' see Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, especially chapter 7. Cf. MacPherson, "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism," 637-642.

of the universe itself, beyond the human sphere, or in the commands of God, how can it bind us? But there is no a priori truth here. Our belief in it is fed by the notion that there is nothing between an extra-human ontic foundation for the good on the one hand, and the pure subjectivism of arbitrarily conferred significance on the other. But there is a third possibility, the one I have just outlined, of *a good which is inseparable from our best self-interpretation*. Ironically, a mainstream naturalism itself, in its blindness to self-interpretation, tends to accredit the stark alternative and hence to perpetuate its own confusion and incoherence about morality.[500]

It is within our shared meanings that Taylor seeks to find a moral "order." Our substantive ethical reasoning is oriented neither by a brute, given metaphysical reality that precedes our interpretations of the world nor by our biological needs understood without reference to our self-understanding. Rather the key idea is that we can arrive through intersubjective interpretation at an understanding of the human world that is real. To say that it isn't real because it isn't, say, the world as described by physics, is to fall into a version of the reductionist naturalism Taylor criticizes with his "self-interpreting animals" thesis.[501] Indeed, Taylor's position here rests on the quiet success of his critique of reductive naturalism. For such reasons, we might join Rainer Forst in describing Taylor's position as "hermeneutic realism."[502]

Taylor shouldn't be understood as longing to turn back the cosmological clock or simply re-enchant the world. Rather than resurrecting ancient, discredited cosmologies to serve as the basis for the "get it right" criterion, Taylor looks to the sphere of "moral meanings" arising from the poetic powers of human nature. As he remarks, "We are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim of defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance."[503] The moral "order" that orients our substantive thinking proceeds from our moral emotions or "affective-

---

[500] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 342, italics mine. For a good discussion of the difficulties of developing a non-Platonic account of objective value see Joel Anderson, "The Personal Lives of Strong Evaluators: Identity, Pluralism, and Ontology in Charles Taylor's Value Theory," *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 17-38.
[501] See the discussion in chapter two of this dissertation.
[502] Rainer Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism*, trans. John M. M. Farrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 223. cf. Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997), 23, 76-77.
[503] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 512.

conative responses,"[504] to use Joel Anderson's term, because it is fundamentally through these that we have "access" to the moral world. His talk of "resonance" here points back to a thesis we discussed in chapter two—namely, that it is through our moral emotions make possible a range of significances that would otherwise be blocked for us. The moral order orienting our practical reasoning emerges in the shared interpretation of our *Lebenswelt* as informed by our moral emotions. Of course, our moral emotions can be corrupted in numerous ways, as we discussed in chapter two, but the proper response isn't to flee from our feelings for safer ground, which amounts to "a flight from the human."[505] Rather, the better response is to cultivate those emotional responses that are best while weeding out those that are malicious, callous, biased, and so on.[506] The moral order that orients our substantive practical reasoning is thus an interpreted world emerging for our collective attempt to make the best sense of our moral emotions.

## 4.3 Dialogical Practical Reason

While this conception of a moral "order" in terms of a world of intersubjectively shared meanings may make the idea of an "order" to which practical reason is responsive more palatable to a post-Aristotelian age, the sphere of meaningful interpretation is fragmented and contested. In the sphere of ethical interpretation, we don't find a moral order but rather fractured, hotly debated moral (dis)orders that quite plausibly will never been reconciled. John Rawls has described this as "the fact of reasonable pluralism."[507] Taylor recognizes the persistence of conflicting conceptions of the good. What he calls the moral "frameworks" within which moral agents live their lives are multiple and contested.[508] The continued existence of radically different ethical world-pictures of the kind we find between theists and atheists contributes to what he calls the mutual "fragilization" of these

---

[504] Joel Anderson, "The Personal Lives of Strong Evaluators: Identity, Pluralism, and Ontology in Charles Taylor's Value Theory," *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 22.

[505] Charles Taylor, "The Concept of a Person," in *Human Agency and Language*, 113.

[506] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8; Charles Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (January 2011): 12-13.

[507] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), xvii.

[508] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 16-17.

frameworks.[509] As suggested earlier, his meta-ethic is motivated in part by an attempt to do justice to the diversity of ethical perspectives. Recognition of lasting ethical pluralism doesn't force Taylor to retreat from a substantive conception of practical rationality but rather to reformulate it in an explicitly dialogical manner.

A common theme in the anti-theory literature, as we noted at the beginning of this dissertation, is that moral philosophy has modeled itself wrongly on various fields that are ill-fitting to ethical thought, e.g., law, bureaucratic administration, and/or natural science. We re-encounter a similar thought here. Those bemoaning the failure of practical reason, those flying white flags of surrender in the face of ethical disagreement have embraced according to Taylor, a flawed model for practical reason:

> modern philosophy, and to some extent modern culture, has lost its grip on the proper patterns of practical reason. Moral argument is understood according to inappropriate models, and this naturally leads to skepticism and despair, which in turn has an effect on our conception of morality, gives it a new shape (or misshapes it).[510]

Taylor describes the false model of ethical thinking to which many moderns are drawn under the heading of an "apodictic" as opposed to an "ad hominem" conception of practical reason.[511] The so-called "apodictic" conception maintains that we can isolate a basic criterion that lies at the root of moral thinking. In Taylor's words, "It wants us to look for 'criteria' to decide the issue, i.e., some considerations which could be established even outside the perspectives in dispute and which would nevertheless be decisive."[512] Here "outside" has a double meaning. In the first sense, it amounts to saying that practical reasoning is independent of the situated standpoints of moral agents. From the standpoint of the thinker in the grip of an "apodictic" conception of practical reason, the aim is to achieve what Bernard Williams has called "the Archimedean point," i.e., "something to which even

---

[509] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007), 556, 595.

[510] Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reasoning" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 59.

[511] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reasoning," 36.

[512] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 73; cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 93, where he distinguishes between two kinds of ethical theories—those "starting outside ethics" and those "starting inside ethics."

the amoralist or the skeptic is committed but which, properly thought through, will show us that he

is irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken."[513]

This is connected with a second sense of being "outside" the perspective of moral agents—

namely, being independent of the substantive categories employed in an individual's ethical

interpretations or moral intuitions. Taylor writes, "The bad model of practical reasoning, rooted in

the epistemological tradition…wants us to look for 'criteria' to decide the issue, i.e., some

considerations which could be established even outside the perspectives in dispute and which would

nevertheless be decisive."[514] He adds,

> As long as the wrong, external model of practical reason holds sway, the very notion of
> giving a reason smacks of offering some external considerations not anchored in our moral
> intuitions, which can somehow show that certain moral practices and allegiances are correct.
> As external considerations in this sense is one which could convince someone who was quite
> unmoved by a certain vision of the good that he ought to adopt it, or at least act according
> to its prescriptions.[515]

This conception of practical reason presents us with an illusory escape from the messy hermeneutical

issues involved in deciding between rival moral concepts and standpoints. Taylor elaborates:

> Formalisms, like utilitarianism, have the apparent value that they would allow us to ignore
> the problematic distinctions between different qualities of action or modes of life, which
> play such a large part in our actual moral decisions, feelings of admiration, remorse, etc., but
> which are so hard to justify when others controvert them. They offer the hope of deciding
> ethical questions without having to determine which of a number of rival languages of moral
> virtue and vice, of the admirable and contemptible, of unconditional versus conditional
> obligation, are valid.[516]

The attempt to think of practical reason in terms of a maximizing or universalizing logic, on Taylor's

view, evades the fundamental issue of ethical interpretation, i.e., deciding which categories best make

sense of one's moral experience. At one level, as we shall see in chapter six, this criticism neglects the

way in which both utilitarian and Kantian moral theory can absorb our various "thick" ethical

---

[513] See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 29.
[514] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 73.
[515] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 75.
[516] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 231.

languages in terms of which we interpret our lives.[517] But at a deeper level, Taylor's point still holds

true; neo-Kantian and utilitarian theories pre-select a singular relevant moral variable in practical

reasoning. While interpretation is required to apply this criterion to the messy world of human

affairs, the principle itself lies beyond substantive ethical interpretation. It is in this sense that

contemporary theorists embrace an "apodictic" rather than Taylor's preferred "ad hominem" view of

practical reasoning.

In contrast to apodictic conceptions of practical reason, which fix a fundamental criterion

for evaluating practical reason "outside" of the situated standpoints of moral agents, and

consequently evade the most fundamental issues of moral interpretation, the "ad hominem"

approach offers a conception of practical reason from the "inside." But what exactly does this mean?

This means that moral thinking must proceed, as we discussed in chapter two, from our moral

intuitions.[518] For starters, it is the rejection of the "apodictic" model's implicit foundationalism, the

abandonment of the quest for the "Archimedian point." It is the acceptance of the contingency of

ethical reflection, the idea that practical reasoning starts from a situated, enculturated moral

standpoint with all of the resources and deficits, virtues and vices constituting it. In this respect,

Taylor's "ad hominem" model assumes a moral agent rebuilding her ship at sea, to borrow the

Neurathian image co-opted by McDowell.[519]

Moving beyond the mere rejection of foundationalism, Taylor's "ad hominem" conception

of practical reason is explicitly *dialogical* in a way that McDowell and other ethical coherentists are

---

[517] In chapter 6 of this dissertation we shall discuss this in light of two contemporary proceduralists—namely, R.M. Hare and Barbara Herman. Relevant writings here include R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), chapters 2 and 3; Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment."

[518] Taylor writes, "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, *Sources of the Self*, 75. This in turn has implications for moral dialogue must proceed: "One can only argue convincingly about goods which already in some way impinge on people, which they already at some level respond to but may be refusing to acknowledge." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 505.

[519] John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998), §§9-12; John McDowell, *Mind and World*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), Lecture IV, § 7.

not.[520] It is not just that practical reasoning *proceeds from* an ethical standpoint but it often occurs

*between* people of different ethical sensibilities. In the dialogical situation moral reflection isn't

addressed to an anonymous anybody but rather to a specific somebody. This may, of course, have

broader implications, but the dialogue isn't free of the grit of real life; it isn't distant from the psycho-

ethical make-up of real people. This situated starting point gives the interlocutors a certain amount of

material to work with:

> practical argument starts off on the basis that my opponent already shares at least some of
> the fundamental dispositions toward good and right which guide me. The error comes from
> confusion, unclarity, or an unwillingness to face some of what he can't lucidly repudiate; and
> reasoning aims to show up this error. Changing someone's moral view by reasoning is always
> at the same time increasing his self-clarity and self-understanding.[521]

Just as ethical reflection starts from one's own moral intuitions in an attempt to make sense of them,

as we saw in chapter two, so does ethical dialogue appeal to the moral intuitions of one's dialogue

partners. Through ethical argument a moral agent comes to better "self-clarity and self-

understanding," but it would be misleading to suggest that this is the goal of ethical dialogue.[522]

Rather the improved self-awareness is better thought of as the necessary by-product of a dialogical

process aimed at arriving at agreement on the ethical subject matter at hand.

Not only is the "ad hominem" conception of practical reasoning dialogical, but it also

stresses the "comparative" character of practical reasoning. The criterion for determining the

superiority of a given ethical interpretation is how a given interpretation stands to our previous

interpretations. In this sense it is "internal" to our moral thinking in the sense that improvement

need not refer to "an Archimedian point," but rather is relative to another position. Taylor writes:

> Practical reasoning…is a reasoning in transitions. It aims to establish, not that some position
> is correct absolutely but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned,
> covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions. We show one of
> these comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the *move* from A to B
> constitutes a gain epistemically. This is something we do when we show, for instance, that
> we get from A to B by identifying and resolving a contradiction in A or a confusion which A

---

[520] As Taylor reminds us, "reasoning…inescapably involves dialogical collaboration and exchange, these two
facets can never be wholly separated from each other." Charles Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," *Faith and
Philosophy* 28 (January 2011): 9.

[521] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 36.

[522] As Rainer Forst seems to sometimes suggest of Taylor. See Forst, *Contexts of Justice*, 224-227.

relied on, or by acknowledging the importance of some factor which A screened out, or something of the sort. The argument fixes on the nature of the transition from A to B. The nerve of the rational proof consists in showing that this transition is an error-reducing one. The argument turns on rival interpretations of possible transitions from A to B, or B to A.[523]

In contrast to apodictic models, which set out in advance the relevant feature of practical reasoning, the internal, ad hominem conception looks modest, even minimalist. Within this framework, it remains an open question which features of an interpretation will make it superior to another. This consequently opens up practical reasoning to a wider range of pluralistic considerations than formal consistency or instrumental rationality, the standard examples of external criteria.[524]

How does transitional argumentation work? Taylor gives us three examples of what he has in mind. First, drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, he points to the way one position can provide an account of certain problems or anomalies suffered by another position.[525] A felicitous transition is found in a movement toward a position that explains, sheds light on, and/or accounts for the features experienced in the other position:

> What may convince us that a given transition from X to Y is a gain is not only or even so much how X and Y deal with the facts, but how they deal with each other. It may be that from the standpoint of Y, not just the phenomena in dispute, but also the history of X and its particular pattern of anomalies, difficulties, makeshifts, and breakdowns an be greatly illuminated. In adopting Y, we make better sense not just of the world, but of our history of trying to explain the world, part of which has been played out in terms of X.[526]

But this also raises problems for Taylor's account because, as Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, there is no clear-cut way of deciding which way to narrate many transitions.[527] What one agent perceives as a positive interpretive gain, another may see as a negative loss. Even if this is so,

---

[523] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 72.

[524] As Smith puts it, "The crucial point is that what counts as rationally defensible or a gain is not determinable independently and in advance of the actual transition. There is no appeal to neutral criteria which might be brought to bear *whatever* the transition is between." Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity*, 62.

[525] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 60 (October 1977): 453-472.

[526] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 43-44, quote from p. 43.

[527] Martha Nussbaum, "Our Pasts, Ourselves," *The New Republic*, (April 9 1990): 34. Contrast this with her more positive treatment of Taylor's historiography in Martha Nussbaum, "Charles Taylor: Explanation and Practical Reason," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartha Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 237-238. For another critique of Taylor's 'transitional' view of practical reason see Hartmut Rosa, "Goods and Life-Forms: Relativism in Charles Taylor's Political Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 71 (May/June 1995): 23-26.

however, Taylor might respond that it only demonstrates the difficulty narrating transitions—not that we cannot do with some success and not we have an alternative to it.

A second kind of comparative argument takes the form of articulation itself. Recall from our discussion in chapter three that moral agents live their lives against a "background" with substantial awareness, know-how that escapes conscious reflection. Taylor tells us that this can function as a shared resource in both scientific and moral contexts: "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."[528] Discussions of ethical pluralism and moral disagreement often wrongly assume that we have two completely worked-out standpoints that are at odds. Taylor's point is that there is often shared ground that just remains out of focus because it belongs to this implicit moral knowledge, which he analogizes to tact. Once we reject this flawed assumption things look different:

> The range of rational argument is greatly extended…once we see that not all disputes are between fully explicit positions…*a great deal of moral argument involves the articulation of the implicit*, and this extends the range of the ad hominem far beyond the easy cases where the opponent offers us purchase in one explicit premise.[529]

This is one reason why Taylor's view of practical reason does not lapse into relativism *contra* Hartmut Rosa.[530]

The final kind of transitional argument is analogous to perceptual correction. To correct an error in our sight, hearing, smell, taste, etc., we re-adjust and do a double-take, what Taylor calls "getting good perceptual purchase" on an object.[531] This doesn't involve jumping outside to an

---

[528] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 44-50, quote from p. 48.

[529] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 55, italics mine. Taylor thinks that Richard Rorty makes a version of this mistake. See Charles Taylor, "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition," in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 257-275.

[530] It is an overstatement to say, as Rosa does, "We literally live in different worlds, with different lexical structures, as the Kuhnians would have it and therefore with different goods, feelings, and selves. That is why I think that Taylor's attempt to have recourse to some (substantial) human constants at this point is incompatible with his view of man as a fundamentally open and self-interpreting animal, and without this recourse, his talk of growth and progress and 'truer grasps of the human condition' becomes implausible and unfounded." What Rosa misses is precisely the way in which agents inhabit a shared, yet under-articulated world. See Hartmut Rosa, "Goods and Life-Forms: Relativism in Charles Taylor's Political Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 71 (May/June, 1995): 20-26, quotation on p. 25.

[531] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 74-75, quote from p. 75; Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 51-52.

external measure but involves "transitions in a single subject,"[532] i.e., improvements from within

perceptual or moral-interpretive space. Thus, for example, suppose I come to recognize that I have

been an emotionally distant, uninterested, and inadequately attentive older sibling. This new

interpretation may emerge in dialogue and be supported by various stories and examples. But in

coming to see myself in these terms and consequently feel regret at my past behavior and

recognize/feel the pain caused to others by my, say, pre-occupation with myself, I come to

understand myself, my situation, and others affected by me in a better way. The second interpretation

strikes me as a more accurate picture of myself. This improvement, which Taylor holds to be "the

commonest form of practical reasoning in our lives," is what he calls a "self-justifying transition."[533]

These three kinds of transitional argument allow us to engage in practical reasoning, Taylor's

argument runs, even if we cannot isolate an perspective independent, fixed standard by which to

evaluate practical reasoning. Taylor thinks that this is a viable middle path between a moral

skepticism that thinks human reason cannot get a grip on ethics and an apodictic conception of

practical reason that thinks we can rise above the contingencies of our culture and time to articulate

an absolute criterion for picking out good moral reasons. These two errors turn out, if Taylor is right,

to share a common element.

The key point for our purposes is that this transitional, dialogical conception of practical

reason enables Taylor to do three things: (a) hold on to the idea that practical reasoning is necessarily

oriented towards a conception of the good/moral order, (b) recognize "the fact of reasonable

pluralism," i.e., the deeply fragmented, contested nature of the moral order(s) that orient our lives,

and (c) still admit a place for rational, moral dialogue. In short, Taylor's dialogical conception of

practical reason allows him to defend a conception of substantive practical reason that is relevant to a

post-teleological age, an age fraught with disagreement. The recovery of a substantive conception of

practical reasoning (and ethical theory) turns on the central role of 'the good.' But what does this

mean? We will now turn to this question.

---

[532] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 52.
[533] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 53; cf. Taylor, "Reason, Faith, and Meaning," 12-13.

**4.4 Anatomy of the Good**

Taylor traces modern moral philosophy's "inarticulacy" back to its estrangement from "the good." But the meaning of "the good" is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could refer to a *specific content*, i.e., a particular formulation of what the good life is. On the other hand, it could refer to *the structure* of the good life i.e., features we should expect any view of human flourishing to exhibit. In Taylor's writings on moral philosophy we see elements of both. However, I have stressed from the outset the importance of distinguishing his *critique* of modern moral philosophy from his *positive vision*. The latter is advanced within the space cleared by the former. At the level of critique, Taylor's concern is with the structural features of the good. Modern moral philosophy springs, to be sure, from various concrete views of the good, which are canvassed in Taylor's rich historical account.[534] But these cannot begin to be lucidly addressed if theorists continue to operate under the assumption that their work doesn't rely on a view of the good. At the level of critique, Taylor attempts to demonstrate how theories of morally right action are themselves reliant on conceptions of the good, despite claims to the contrary. Here the argumentation is structural and sets the stage for Taylor's positive vision. We need to trace the shape of "the good," regardless of its more specific instantiations. Otherwise put, you could say we are interested here in *the form of the good* rather than its specific *contents or fillings*.

What then is the form of "the good"? Taylor's technical terminology, I want to suggest, provides an answer to this question. Indeed, we can better appreciate the "idiosyncratic"[535] character of Taylor's specialized vocabulary, if we see these concepts as articulating the shape of "the good." That is to say, Taylor's unique conceptual apparatus is meant to sketch various dimensions of what is presupposed by "the good life" and "the good as the object of our love or allegiance."[536] Getting clear on the meaning of these concepts is a crucial step in reconstructing and evaluating Taylor's

---

[534] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Parts II-V. Cf. Ruth Abbey's comment that "Taylor does not think that ethics is history 'all the way down'. From a meta-ethical viewpoint, he discerns certain structural features that are common to the moral life of all human beings." Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 10; also cf. Smith, *Charles Taylor*, 101-102.
[535] Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 159.
[536] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 79.

argument. It is here where we can most clearly see what contemporary theories supposedly lack. By shedding light on the meaning of "the good" understood as it is refracted through his specialized concepts, we can see what is missing from modern moral philosophies, which focus exclusively, according to Taylor, on "the right."

Our story begins with Frankfurt's famous distinction between "first-order and second-order desires"—desires and desires for or against other desires.[537] The central idea captured by his famous distinction between first and second-order desires is that human beings can adopt attitudes toward their desires. For example, an agent's desire not to feel the jealousy that burns in her heart towards her ex-lover's newfound love exemplifies this phenomenon.[538]Here the agent adopts a critical stance toward her own desires; she doesn't want to have them. She doesn't want to be the kind of person who feels jealousy like this but rather wishes she could take the high road and wish her ex the best. Despite her wish to be above spiteful and jealous urges, that's not what she really wants, that's not what she actually feels. That is to say, she doesn't want the desires and urges she in fact has. This is the kind of doubling up that characterizes Frankfurt's notion of a second-order desire.

His distinction expresses the root capacity that makes possible a wide range of psychological conditions, e.g., whole-heartedness, inner conflict, and ambivalence.[539] It provides him the basic conceptual machinery for articulating our involvement in and engagement with our desire. At one end of the spectrum, Frankfurt admits the conceptual possibility of agents leading volitionally flat lives, i.e., volitional structures without second-order desires. He calls these people "*wantons*." The difference is not just that the more complex types, *persons* (on Frankfurt's analysis), might not like the way in which they are motivated as in the case above. The difference between the two is whether or not the individual simply does what she wants or whether she takes a stance period, positive or negative, toward those desires. Frankfurt writes, "When a *person* acts, the desire by which he is moved

---

[537] Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988), 11-25.
[538] This example comes from Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 19.
[539] See Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, chapter 3.

is either the will he wants or a will he wants to be without. When a *wanton* acts, it is neither."[540] Personhood, by contrast, is fundamentally tied to our reflective second order stance toward our first order motivations. What we mean when we talk about "persons" is the kind of being whose self-reflective nature enables them to take a stance toward their own life of desire.

While Taylor agrees with Frankfurt's analysis of two-level desires and the subsequent complexity it reveals in human psychic life, he advances a further distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of evaluations—namely, "weak" and "strong evaluation."[541] His central idea is that strong evaluations are independent of an agent's desires in a way that weak desires are not. At this point Taylor takes for granted the reflexive stance we take towards our own desires and investigates two kinds of grounds for our self-criticism. He calls those evaluations of desire on the basis of its "contingent incompatibility" with other desires "weak evaluation."[542] A student may decide that the burning desire to take a road trip is a bad desire to have during finals week. The value of taking road-trips is endorsed, but our agent holds that it fits poorly with her other existing desires like, presumably, the desire to pass one's classes. Strong evaluations, by contrast, take issue with the "worth" of a desire without reference to contingent fit.[543] Most critically, an agent cannot cite her lack of interest in self-defense. We condemn the desire to abuse animals on grounds that are not desire dependent. The problem with abuse isn't that it fits badly with our other projects, but that it is cruel.[544] Otherwise put, weak and strong evaluations have different exit conditions, so to speak. We cannot evade a strong evaluation because we don't like it. Taylor writes:

> A weak evaluation is one which depends on choices that we may not make, or our espousing ends which we may not accept. We can thus defeat the claim that something should have value for us, by choosing another end, or repudiating the one on which this value depends.

---

[540] Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," 19.

[541] Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), § 1.1. An earlier version of this distinction appears in Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 281-299.

[542] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 19.

[543] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 18.

[544] For an example of this kind see Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* 18.

> In the case of strong evaluations, we cannot so release ourselves, and our attempt to do so reflects negatively on us.[545]

The key distinction between weak and strong evaluations is whether 'not caring' is enough to immunize you from criticism or whether not caring makes you all the worse for it. As Taylor puts it, "'Strong evaluation' is a term of art I want to introduce, such that some end is strongly valued when we acknowledge that its being an end for us is not just contingent on our happening to desire or need it, when, in other words, we allow that *we would be lesser beings if we should cease to want or need it*."[546]

Although Taylor takes Frankfurt's distinction between first and second order desires as his starting point, he departs significantly from the structure and implications of Frankfurt's position. As Arto Laitinen has observed, strong evaluations should not be understood as merely a higher-order desires but rather as "evaluative beliefs."[547] This saves Taylor from the problem of explaining why a higher-order desire has normative force, a problem that has long dogged Frankfurt's position.[548] More importantly, since strong evaluations are based on beliefs about the good, they have a wider purported scope of validity than second-order desires. Strong evaluations make claims on others that second-order desires do not and cannot. The force of a desire, even if a higher-order desire, is limited to the agent with the desire, while an evaluative belief is not limited in such a way. If a given agent has a second-order desire, it has a force for her but not necessarily others. Strong evaluations are different in this regard. By contrast, strong evaluations make claims that extend beyond an "agent's subjective motivational set," to borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams.[549] The evaluation is not

---

[545] Charles Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011), 294.

[546] Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics,* eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 134, italics mine.

[547] See Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources,* 20.

[548] For this line of criticism see Gary Watson, "Free Agency," in *Agency and Answerability* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 13-32.

[549] This term comes from Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), 102, de-italicized. Laitinen notes that Taylor's deviation from Frankfurt on this point carries with it implications similar to those I have traced above, but he misplaces the issue slightly. On his view, the key difference between Frankfurt and Taylor's moral psychology at this point is *whether* a desire is criticizable. But this doesn't get at the core issue because even on a simple higher-order desire model, lower-level desires are criticizable insofar as they don't match up with the higher-order desire. The key difference here concerns the *scope* of criticism. The key issue is whether you can criticize another's lower-order

contingent on the desires of an agent, which includes any higher-order desires that an agent may have. These claims are grounded, so the story goes, on something that justifies the evaluation regardless of what the agent desires.

Taylor expresses the notion of the desire-independence of our strong evaluations in terms of idea of an external standard for desires. The reason why strong evaluations can't be shaken off by not caring flows from the fact that something outside of ourselves stands as our criterion for evaluating our desires.[550] Strong evaluations, as Taylor puts it,

> *involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices*, but rather *stand independent* of these and offer *standards* by which they can be judged. So while it may not be judged a moral lapse that I am living a life that is not really worthwhile or fulfilling, to describe me in these terms is nevertheless to condemn me in the name of a standard independent of my own tastes and desires, which I ought to acknowledge.[551]

But in what sense is there an "independent" standard for forming strong-evaluations? While this may seem to raise the specter of metaphysically "queer"[552] entities of the sort criticized by J.L. Mackie, our discussion above points towards a different answer—Taylor's answer. It is within the realm of intersubjectively shared meanings and significances that our desires can be criticized without invoking a Platonic realm of Ideas or ghostly Moorean properties. Our shared articulations of the good provide the means for strong criticism, i.e., critiques that cannot be dodged by not caring. Strong evaluations are thus a kind of evaluative judgment characterized by desire independence made possible by standards inherent in our shared meanings.[553] Articulation introduces these standards into the moral world.

---

desires regardless of what her higher-order desires are. Here Frankfurt would have to say 'no,' but Taylor could say 'yes.' See Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 20.

[550] Desire-independence here means simply that we cannot cite the absence of a desire or a lack of concern as a justified response to a criticism. This does not mean, as Gary Gutting has pointed out, that the practices are not themselves products of human desire in the sense that our human make-up shapes certain practices and institutions we have. In this sense, strong evaluations can be seen as connected to human desire. See Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 150.

[551] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 4. Emphasis Mine.

[552] J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 38-42.

[553] As Gary Gutting writes, "values are independent of our desires even though they are not independent of 'the meanings things have for us,' meanings they do not have from the absolute standpoint." Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, 149-150, quote from p. 149.

Taylor's decision to start with Frankfurt's distinction between first and second-order desires has, as Arto Laitinen has argued, the unfortunate consequence of leading us to think that strong evaluations primarily or even exclusively take an agent's own desires or self as their object. But there is no reason why strong evaluation understood as desire-independent, evaluations must take an agent's own desires or even self to be the sole object of evaluation. Indeed, as Laitinen stresses, the question of self-evaluation is parasitic upon a logically prior evaluation of what is good. It is in virtue of strong evaluating a certain mode of being or action that our judgment regarding the desire to do so makes sense.[554] Thus, we shouldn't think that strong evaluations are necessarily perfectionistic in the sense of exclusively being concerned with cultivating an internally pure motivational life.

The distinction between weak and strong evaluation brings Taylor, as he notes, within the orbit of Kant's distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, but there is a crucial distinction.[555] Both distinctions emphasize that some evaluations depend on individual desires or projects; others do not. Categorical imperatives like strong evaluations can't be escaped via an 'I don't care' response. Hypothetical imperatives like weak evaluations can be so avoided because they turn precisely on the existence or non-existence of an agent's desires.[556] But unlike the *formal* Kantian categorical imperative, Taylor's strong evaluation is necessarily couched in *substantive* terms, what he calls "a vocabulary of worth."[557] An agent violates the categorical imperative by having a formally contradictory maxim. By contrast, strong evaluations gain their bite in the application of specific ethical concepts, i.e., in being 'bad' in some more specific regard expressed by a substantive description. In both cases, the immoral agent is acting counter to practical reason, but practical reason is, as we saw in the above section, understood in fundamentally different ways. Kant's account of the categorical/hypothetical imperative distinction fuses (a) the distinction between desire-independent evaluation and desire-dependent evaluation distinction with (b) the distinction

---

[554] Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 44-49.
[555] See, for instance, Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," 295.
[556] Cf. Philippa Foot's interpretation of the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives and critique of it in "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978) 157-173.
[557] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" 24.

between formal and substantive evaluation. By contrast, Taylor's distinction between strong and weak evaluations separates the two distinctions.[558] In summary, Taylor's conception of strong evaluation picks out a distinctive kind of evaluative *judgment*, i.e., those that are both (a) desire-independent and (b) substantive evaluations. These two features express what I take to be the core meaning behind Taylor's notion of strong evaluation.

Strong evaluative judgments bring into play a "vocabulary of worth," i.e., substantive evaluative *concepts* in terms of which these judgments are couched. Taylor calls these "qualitative distinctions."[559] These are evaluative concepts that are full of substantial content like 'obsequious,' 'kind,' 'generous,' 'vengeful,' 'inconsiderate,' or 'patriarchal.' Taylor cites the distinctions between "fragmented or integrated, alienated or free, saintly or merely human, courageous or pusillanimous and so on" as representations of the kinds of language has in mind here.[560] Qualitative evaluative terms give an agent ways of pinpointing aspects of an action, way of being, or feeling and thereby "articulating" its goodness or badness, i.e., they articulate why acting in some way or another would be good or bad, wherein its goodness/badness consists.[561] Here we encounter a basic sense in which articulacy is bound up with the good for Taylor—namely, these substantive bits of our language help us express those features of the moral world that stand independent of our desires. They justify our desires in a way that the mere existence of a desire does not.[562]

Taylor's notion of "qualitative distinctions" picks out the same chunk of discourse as Williams marks with the term "thick ethical concepts."[563] In both cases we are dealing with terms

---

[558] Cf. A.W. Moore, "Maxims and Thick Ethical Concepts" *Ratio*, n.s., 19 (June 2006): 129-147.

[559] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 19. While this concept plays a large part of his argument in *Sources*, Taylor introduces this concept in his early essays on human agency. See, for instance, Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" and Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods."

[560] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?", 16.

[561] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 88.

[562] Taylor, "What is Human Agency?", 23-26; Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 141.

[563] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 140-141. As he describes them, "substantive or thick ethical concepts…are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action, though that reason need not be a decisive one and may be outweighed by other reasons…Of course, exactly what reason for action is provided, and to whom, depends on the situation, in ways that may well be governed by this and by other ethical concepts, but some general connection with action is clear enough. We may say, summarily, that such concepts are 'action guiding'" (140). But not only do these concepts direct our action, they also are responsive

that incorporate ample descriptive content.[564] But the difference lies in the point of emphasis and the

purpose for which the terms are deployed. For Williams, the notion of a 'thick concept' is introduced

in the context of dismantling the idea that there are two kinds of utterances—descriptive and

normative. Thick concepts blur the fact/value distinction in such a way that makes it philosophically

useless.[565] While Taylor agrees with Williams in this regard, he wields the concept of 'qualitative

distinctions' as a tool primarily against formalistic moral theory. The point is that our ethical thinking

needs qualitative notions in order to understand why a given action or way of living, is good. We

might say that Williams and Taylor capture the same domain of evaluative language but give it

different inflections.

These substantive concepts form distinctions that are holistic in nature; they tend to cluster

up and form interconnected evaluative networks. Adding or subtracting evaluative concepts will have

effects down the line. As Taylor writes, "refining an evaluative vocabulary by introducing new terms

would alter the sense of the existing terms, even as it would with our colour vocabulary."[566] This

insight leads Taylor to introduce the notion of "frameworks" that consist of the various evaluative

concepts we employ in making sense of our lives. Within the matrix formed by these various

concepts we have a sense of better and worse ways of living. As Taylor puts it:

> a framework incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions. To think, feel, judge within
> such a framework is to function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of
> feeling is incomparably higher than others which are more readily available to us. I am using
> 'higher' here in a generic sense. The sense of what the difference consists in may take
> different forms. One form of life may be seen as fuller, deeper, a style of life as more

---

to features of the world around us. Williams writes, "their application is guided by the world. A concept of this
sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to
apply to some new situation. In many cases the agreement will be spontaneous, while in other cases there is
room for judgment and comparison. Some disagreement at the margin may be irresoluble, but this does not
mean that the use of the concept is not controlled by the facts or by the users' perception of the world…We
can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guided" (141).
Also see Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 174-5.

[564] Consider a short list of 'thick' terms: feckless, pander, flaunt, goody-goody, melodramatic, parochial,
decadent, mercy, pity, insecure, binge, conceited, coddle, chauvinistic, casuist, cantankerous, bawdy, awkward,
obsequious, impostor, swindler, scoundrel, naïve, sophisticated, manipulative, abusive, gallant, fussy, whimsical,
vain, shifty, sensationalistic, mock, scoff, boisterous, ruthless, loaf, amateur, fickle, and the list could go on.

[565] See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 7. For another argument of this sort see Hilary
Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), chapter 2.

[566] Taylor "What is Human Agency?" 19.

admirable, a given demand as making an absolute claim against other merely relative ones, and so on.[567]

Better and worse, higher and lower ways of living are expressed through the network of evaluative terms we use for interpreting ourselves and making sense of our moral worlds. The idea is that an agent lives her life in the midst of a plurality of ethical notions all of which shape her self-understanding and weigh on her deliberations. Thick ethical notions constitute the "moral space"[568] in which an agent lives her life.

Here we can see the beginning of a nesting pattern characteristic not only of Taylor's account of the good life but that of other prominent virtue theorists (broadly construed), i.e., an elaboration of multiple interlocking levels that spell out and give conceptual substance to talk of human flourishing.[569] Qualitative distinctions, which make possible the concepts that make possible desire-independent, substantive ethical judgments (strong evaluations), stand to "frameworks" or "moral space" in roughly the way that virtues stand to the flourishing human life in Aristotle or other virtue thinkers. The space structured by the various qualitative distinctions making claims on an agent constitutes the "framework" or "moral space" within which she lives. Since "qualitative distinctions" pick out those "facets or components of a good life," Taylor goes on to talk about them in terms of what he also calls "life goods."[570] Taylor's notion of a "framework" thus describes how an individual agent lives with a notion of the good life. The space constituted by the various ethical concepts has a characteristic shape such that some distinctions carry more weight than others and as a consequence, he introduces the term "hypergood"[571] to refer to those goods that are given greater importance and as a consequence exert a kind of structuring influence on the rest of life.

This nesting pattern goes further to include a broader sense of the moral world in which an agent finds herself. So far we have looked at judgments based on the good (*strong evaluations*) and the concepts we use in articulating the good life (*qualitative distinctions* or *life goods*). To these levels of

---

[567] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 19-20.

[568] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 2 entitled "The Self in Moral Space."

[569] Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapters 14 and 15; Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, 19.

[570] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

[571] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

analysis Taylor adds what he calls "*constitutive goods*," and the closely allied concept of "*moral sources*."[572]

Constitutive goods to express what it is that accounts for the goodness of the good life by appealing to the broader pictures that explain why good things are good. They refer to "*pictures of the human predicament* which show the goodness and rightness of the things we feel bound to seek."[573]

Constitutive goods thus refer to the bigger pictures that are at play in making sense of an agent's ethical life and world. The goodness of various "life goods," according to Taylor, "has to be explained by reference to a cosmic reality, the order of things. This is good in a fuller sense: the key to this order is the Idea of the Good itself. Their relation to this is what makes certain of our actions or aspirations good; it is what constitutes the goodness of these actions or motives."[574] Our discussion in chapter two has already evoked and elucidated this notion to some extent. We will return to it in the final section of this chapter. For now, let me simply note that it counts as the widest possible context for understanding the good life. It serves as the ultimate frame for explaining why a take on the good life makes sense. In this sense, it counts as the broadest frame constituting his articulation of "the good."

Taylor's architecture of "the good" has several distinctive characteristics. First, his insistence on the centrality of the substantive character of the moral life is strikingly abstract. It occurs at a structural level by spelling out the shape rather than the content of the human good. His critique serves to recover moral substance by means of abstract meta-ethical argumentation. Moreover, despite his deep Aristotelian influence, his categories of "qualitative distinctions" and "frameworks" remain markedly conceptual rather than dealing with virtue understood as affectively grounded habits. In this regard, Taylor's attempted recovery of the language of virtue isn't doesn't penetrate deeply into the phenomenon of virtue itself.[575] Finally, his argument fixates on the presence or

---

[572] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92.

[573] Charles Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 212, italics mine.

[574] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92.

[575] This has been shown to be a more general failing for recent virtue ethical thinking. See Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4-6. From different directions, Taylor's account has been criticized for an overly intellectual, reflective conception of human

absence of "qualitative distinctions" or thick concepts in moral thinking and neglects, for instance,

the way various actors can use the same thick concepts with different extensions or different

weightings in deliberation (Appiah)[576] and the way thick concepts can undergo change in tandem

with evolving social norms (Anderson).[577]

I speculate that these features of Taylor's account of "the good" are explained by two

motivations driving his account. First, his pre-occupation with procedural moral theory, which

allegedly distances us from the ethical categories in which moral agents make sense of their lives,

leads him to concentrate on recovering substantive ethical categories. As he puts it, "It is these

languages of qualitative contrast that get *marginalized*, or even *expunged altogether* by the utilitarian or

formalist reductions."[578] The worry is that thicker notions get lost in formal-proceduralistic

reductions. Many of the features of Taylor's treatment of the good bear the mark of this focus on

recovering these categories. Second, Taylor's desire for establishing a space for broadly pluralistic

dialogue pushes him towards abstract meta-ethical critique, which clarifies the framework for ethical

thinking without dictating its content. It is by establishing the frame for thinking. It is up to actual

ethical dialogue to determine the content of the good.


## 4.5 Morality and the Good Life

Having articulated what Taylor means by "the good," I now turn to our final questions: why

does the good have priority and if so, in what sense? And what implications, if any, does this have for

moral theory? On my reading of Taylor, it is in virtue of *the holism of significance* that procedural moral

theories are shown to be lacking. This lays the grounds for holding modern moral theory to be

"inarticulate." Proceduralist moral theories are those committed to "the priority of the right over the

---

agency. See Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and David Wong, "Aspects of Identity and Agency," in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 30-32; Owen Flanagan, "Identity and Strong and Weak Evaluation" in *Identity, Character, and Morality*, ed. Flanagan and Rorty (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 37-65.

[576] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2006), chapter 4.

[577] Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), Chapter 5, § 2.

[578] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 234, italics mine.

good"[579] by which Taylor means "the thesis that morality is concerned only with what actions are obligatory and not with qualitative distinctions."[580] These theories hold that questions of the good life are logically independent from questions of moral obligation and thus the former can be excised from moral philosophy without consequence. The result is a "division of labor" within moral philosophy as defended by thinkers like Kymlicka and Habermas. The link between this theoretical strategy and a procedural conception of practical rationality has been clarified by the above discussion. By severing practical reason from a substantive good to which it is responsible, rationality must assume a procedural form. But this is precisely what "division of labor" theories presuppose. It alone makes plausible the idea that we can have a moral theory that itself doesn't draw on a theory of the good.

Taylor thinks that this move made by proceduralist theories renders them incoherent. As he puts it boldly, "I hold a purely procedural ethics to be inconsistent."[581] The reason is found in Taylor's underlying thesis: "the metaethical construction of a strict procedural ethics oriented to formal principles without antecedent commitment to a concept of the good is untenable. The idea of good is, in principle, a basic presupposition."[582] For this reason the attempt to keep the good at arms length is an instance of philosophical bad faith on the part of the procedural moral theorists.  If Taylor is right, not only are procedural moral theories wrong to think they can do without the good, but they actually rely on a suppressed conception of the good. This was, as we identified in the first chapter, one of the key ideas expressed by Taylor's use of the term "inarticulacy."

Why think, however, that the good is "a basic presupposition" of ethical thinking? What exactly makes proceduralist moral theory "untenable"? The link between morality and the good is exposed, Taylor thinks, by asking 'Why should I be moral?'—a  question recently dubbed by

---

[579] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 88. Contrast with John Rawls, "The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 449-472.
[580] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 532-533n66.
[581] Charles Taylor, "Language and Society" in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action*, ed. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 30.
[582] Taylor, "The Motivation behind a Procedural Ethics," 358; Also see Taylor, "Justice After Virtue."

Christine Korsgaard as "the normative question."[583] This is a notoriously sticky question. Some

preliminary comments are needed to organize our approach to this question. From the outset, we

should mention two ways of failing to answer this question well, which T.M. Scanlon has called

"Pritchard's Dilemma"[584] after Pritchard's notorious critique of moral philosophy and defense of

intuitionism.[585] The first option is that taken by the intuitionists. We could answer the question by

insisting that one ought to do the moral thing precisely because it is the *moral* thing to do. Any other

answer misses the point. This answer, however, suffers from the defect that it, in Scanlon's words,

"simply takes the reason-giving force of moral considerations for granted."[586] The other obvious

answer to Pritchard's question is to appeal to the power of sticks and carrots like "the likelihood of

being found out" or "the costs of social ostracism."[587] This answer seems equally problematic

because it doesn't appeal to "the kind of reason that we suppose a moral person first and foremost to

be moved by."[588] This sets up the challenge to find a middle route that avoids getting impaled on

either of these horns. Scanlon tells us, "a satisfactory answer to our question must not, on the one

hand, merely say that the fact that an action is wrong is a reason not to do it; but it must on the other

hand, provide an account of the reason not to do it that we can see to be intimately connected with

what it is to be wrong."[589] In other words, the normative force of morality resides neither in simply

being the moral thing to do nor in the appeal of non-moral incentives. These problematic poles

shape the space in which Taylor attempts to articulate the link between morality and the good.

Taylor's suggestion is that any adequate answer to the question 'Why ought I be moral?' will

require an appeal to a conception of the good, specifically what he spells out in terms of his

conceptual machinery of strong evaluations, frameworks, lifegoods and constitutive goods. The only

---

[583] Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 10.
[584] T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), 150. Scanlon presents this dilemma in work leading up to the publication of this massive work. See both T.M. Scanlon, "Moral Theory: Understanding and Disagreement," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (June 1995): 346-347; Thomas Scanlon, "The Aims and Authority of Moral Theory," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 6.
[585] See H.A. Prichard "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind*, n.s., 21 (January 1912): 21-37.
[586] Scanlon, What *We Owe to Each Other*, 149.
[587] Scanlon, What *We Owe to Each Other*, 149.
[588] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 150.
[589] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 150.

way to avoid Pritchard's dilemma is by appealing to a conception of the good that at once *amplifies* our understanding of morality without lapsing into a mere sticks and carrots mentality of justifying morality.[590] Without a conception of the good, Taylor alleges, modern moral theorists have "nothing to say"[591] when it comes to the normative force of moral considerations. But the problem isn't *exactly* that theorists have "nothing to say" but rather that they say the *wrong kinds of things*. They might appeal, for instance, to logical consistency (Hare)[592] or transcendental conditions for argumentation (Habermas).[593] But these approaches do not cite, at least officially, a conception of the good. In fact, they pride themselves on the neutrality that comes from grounding their theories on something other than a view of the good. This is, according to Taylor, the problem.

Without a view of the good, they have no way of expressing the gravity of moral considerations. Contemporary theory, Taylor tells us, "has no way of capturing *the background understanding* surrounding any conviction that we ought to act in this or that way—the understanding of the strong good involved. And in particular, it cannot capture the *peculiar background sense*, central to much of our moral life, that *something incomparably important involved*."[594] He further glosses his position by alleging that when it comes to our most basic moral rules, "we can't say *what's good* or *valuable* about them, or *why they command assent*."[595] In other words, we can't understand what good it is to be rational on the proceduralist construal.[596] The problem is that we cannot understand where the *moral* meaning of rational procedures comes from when they are purportedly divorced from a view of the

---

[590] This is what Scanlon himself tries to do, although in a way that doesn't draw on a robust account of the good, as we find in Taylor. See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other,* chapter 4.

[591] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87.

[592] See R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)

[593] See Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 43-115.

[594] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87.

[595] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87, italics mine.

[596] This charge comes out most explicitly in Taylor's critique of the early work of Jürgen Habermas. See Taylor, "Language and Society," 30-31. This debate between Taylor and Habermas is extended in the work of William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1994), part II and Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997), chapter 6.

good.[597] It is precisely the inability of these theories without a view of the good to explain their own normative force that makes them "inarticulate" in the most basic sense. They rest on a hidden view of the good. Taylor writes, "the weakness of procedural theories is not far to seek. It comes out when one asks: what is the basis of the hierarchy they recognize? What makes it mandatory to follow the privileged procedures? The answer has to lie in some understanding of human life and reason, in some positive doctrine of man, and hence the good."[598]

Taylor's claim is thus that a substantive conception of practical reasoning is presupposed by procedural theories, even if they fail to recognize it. Warren Quinn makes a parallel point that gets at what I think Taylor has in mind:

> In much of contemporary moral thought, rationality seems to be regarded as the basic virtue of action or motivation, one that grounds all the other virtues. This…is a mistake. Practical rationality is a virtue of a very special kind. But it is not special in being the most fundamental merit of action or motivation. It is special by being the virtue *of* reason as it thinks about human good. A virtue isn't a virtue because it's rational to have it. A good action isn't good because it's rational to do. On my view, the only proper ground for claiming that a quality is rational to have to an action rational to do is that the quality of action is, on the whole, good. It is human good and bad that stand at the center of practical thought and not any independent ideas of rationality or reasons for action. Indeed, even in its proper place as a quality of practical reason, rationality is validated only by the fact that it is the *excellence* that is, the *good* condition of practical thought. Even here the notion of good has the primary say.[599]

Here we glimpse the sense in which the good must be prior to the procedural sense of practical rationality. The alternative is to be commending a conception of what it is 'right,' i.e., practically rational to do, without being able to explain what's good about it. The gravity of moral considerations must be kept at the forefront of ethical reflection, and this requires appeal to the good.

To be clear, Taylor's argument here isn't a plea for foundationalism. He isn't alleging that modern moral theories lack an account of the foundations of morality. Rather his framing of the problem demands a particular kind of solution that points us back towards the issue of meaning—

---

[597] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 231-233.
[598] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 28.
[599] Warren Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place," in *Morality and Action* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 254.

not grounding. We aren't looking for a basis for morality, but rather a way of deepening our understanding of moral commitments. This comes out clearly if we take note of Taylor's audience. Unlike Korsgaard, who addresses the "normative question" to reflective agents as such, Taylor raises this question to moral agents who already have a "background sense" of morality's importance. This follows from Taylor's moral psychology, which we discussed in chapter two. Recall that for Taylor our moral consciousness springs from certain moral emotions that disclose a unique realm of significances to us.[600] He addresses, in other words, the moral agent who is already open to the ethical. He is thus *not* demanding that moral theory show "how we could convince someone who saw none of the point of our moral beliefs."[601] In other words, the charge isn't that procedural moral theories cannot adequately argue the amoralist into embracing moral convictions. We have already seen how Taylor distances himself from this line of moral theory, which rests on an "apodictic" conception of practical reason. Like McDowell, he sets sail on a Neurathian ship destined to be rebuilt on the ocean's waves. This is a logical consequence of the idea that the moral sphere is opened to us by contingent, moral intuitions.[602] Practical reasoning occurs in dialogue that starts with existing moral consciousness.

Taylor's critique alleges that modern moral theories cannot account for a feature of our moral experience—namely, the peculiar "background significance" we attribute to it. He draws our attention to a gap between the felt gravity of moral considerations and the kind of reasons available from within a procedural moral theory. Neither formal consistency nor instrumental rationality, two of the most infamous criteria provided by procedural theories, explains the gravity of ethical considerations experienced by agents receptive to moral experience. Formalistic procedures are always susceptible to the question of why such a rule matters, why it carries significance.

In this respect, Taylor's position finds perhaps rather strange allies. The contractualist Thomas Scanlon has recently criticized "formal" approaches to moral philosophy on the following

---

[600] See the discussion in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[601] Taylor *Sources of the Self*, 87.

[602] Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 62; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 8.

grounds: "The special force of moral requirements seems quite different from that of, say, principles of logic, even if both are, in some sense, 'inescapable.' And the fault involved in failing to be moved by moral requirements does not seem to be a form of incoherence."[603] In a similar vein, Harry Frankfurt takes issue with what he calls "ethical rationalism" for misconstruing the special character of moral as opposed to other rational or logical failings.[604] He writes, "People are not morally blameworthy just because they reason badly, nor are they morally admirable just because they reason well."[605] He adds, "Revealing that one is a fool evokes criticism of a different sort than revealing that one is a knave."[606] From this differential of response, Frankfurt draws the following conclusion: "The requirements of rationality do not account for the specific and peculiar type of authority and force that moral principles enjoy."[607] The underlying point made by both Scanlon and Frankfurt— the point they share with Taylor—is that any adequate moral theory, if it wishes to address the "normative question," must not ground the normative authority of morality on merely formal/rationalistic/procedural considerations. No such groundings illuminate the normative force of morality.

From this shared common ground in the limitations of formal groundings of ethics, Taylor parts company with his short-term allies. Frankfurt's procedural conception of rationality pushes him to an ultimately voluntaristic basis for morality.[608] Scanlon pushes for a contractualist answer.[609] In contrast to both of these answers, Taylor points us back to a hermeneutically inflected eudaimonistic alternative to formal or procedural models. His thickly conceived, multi-dimensional conception of the good turns up as an integral part of any articulate account of the normative force of morality. As

---

[603] T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1998), 151.
[604] Harry Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," *Autonomes Handeln: Beträge zur Philosophie von Harry G. Frankfurt*, eds. Monika Betzler and Barbara Guckes (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 259.
[605] Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics,"  263.
[606] Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," 263.
[607] Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," 263. He adds, "Unless our standard moral attitudes are hopelessly inappropriate, there must be some warrant for obeying the precepts of the moral law other than whatever warrant may be provided by the authority of reason. Otherwise, there is nothing wrong with disobeying the moral law except that doing so entails inconsistency or incoherence" (268).
[608] Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," § 13; see also Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*.
[609] See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, chapter 4.

he puts it, "the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules, which define the right."[610]

He further elaborates on the link between the 'good' and the 'right' as follows:

> Articulating our qualitative distinctions is *setting out the point of our moral actions*. It explains in a fuller and richer way *the meaning of this action for us*, just what its goodness or badness, being obligatory or forbidden, consists in. It is possible to know, for instance, as a child sometimes does, that a certain act is forbidden, but not to understand yet what kind of badness it exhibits. Later one may learn that it is something dishonourable, or perhaps mean-spirited, in distinction from other forbidden things, which are ruled out just because they're dangerous, or because we can't now pull them off. Many of our virtue terms belong to these richer languages of what I have been calling qualitative discriminations.[611]

The idea seems to be that if we wish to explain or justify a moral injunction, we will have to appeal to "qualitative distinctions" somewhere down the line. Thus, if we try to explain why a claim like 'one ought not to lie' ought to be taken seriously, we will need to draw upon thick concepts like 'honesty' or 'trust' in order to express the point. [612] These in turn are embedded in moral "frameworks" constituting the "moral space" in which agents live their lives. These frameworks are further contextualized in a deeper understanding of the world such that the good life shows up as good. Here we see Taylor's ethical holism in full force. We can only understand the force of moral injunctions when seen in light of a broader conception of the good as reflected in both our evaluative frameworks and the understanding of "constitutive goods" that support them.

The good clearly functions as the source of reasons for action on Taylor's account, but he wants to distance himself from a distorting picture of how this works. He writes, "qualitative distinctions give the reasons for our moral and ethical beliefs. This is not wrong, but it is dangerously misleading—unless we first clarify what it is to offer reasons for moral views."[613] The view he rejects is one characterized by what he calls "basic reasons."[614] On this model, we supply reasons whenever we cite doing X for the sake of Y. This can generate chains of reasons. We do X for the sake of Y, and we do Y for the sake of Z. Thus, I exercise in order to lose weight, and I lose weight in order to fit into a slimmer suit for my best friend's wedding. What is crucial to this kind of reason giving is

---

[610] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89.

[611] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 88, italics mine.

[612] Contrast with T.M. Scanlon, "Thickness and Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 275-287.

[613] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 53.

[614] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 76-78.

that it is essentially, in Taylor's words, "asymmetrical."[615] The latter reasons confer the reason-giving status on the former, but don't fundamentally change how we conceive of the former. The description of the action remains static but we can understand a further purpose to which it is connected. The key linking term here is 'for the sake of.' Taylor thinks that procedural models function this way. "It is one of the self-given tasks of much modern moral theory," he tells us, "to identify a basic reason in this sense."[616] One consequence of this conception of practical reasoning is that it exerts a unifying pressure on moral thinking as we try to find a small number (ideally one) of "basic reasons" for justifying our moral ideals. Herein lies one of the key problems with this way of framing the issue. Even if we were to substitute a wide range of "qualitative distinctions" for a "basic reason," however, this alone wouldn't fix the problem with the prevailing conception of giving reasons because, in a phrase, it neglects how reasons can be articulations.

Taylor's alternative conception of reason giving *qua* articulation is, unfortunately, marred by its rather cryptic and truncated exposition. As I read him, the guiding idea is that the 'good' illuminates the "meaning" of specific injunctions of the 'right.' The notions of "meaning" and "significance" provide the keys to understanding Taylor's conception of reason giving *qua* articulation. Many of our moral judgments themselves do not fully unpack the value(s) on which the force of the judgment reposes but need to be drawn back into our thick ethical language in order to do so. What gets lost on modern moral philosophers is the ability to spell out the meaning or significance of the injunctions prescribed by their theories. Thick ethical notions are integral to embedding morally 'right' actions in webs of meaning that constitute their significance.

Moreover, given the holistic character of "qualitative distinctions," reason giving *qua* articulation can't be seen as simply naming a thick concept that supposedly expresses the value behind an act. Rather we should expect articulation to involve the internal play of qualitative distinctions constituting our moral 'frameworks.' In short, we might say that Taylor's conception of how the 'good' stands to the 'right' has *breadth* to it. And bound up with this breadth is the pluralism

---

[615] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 74.
[616] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 74.

that accompanies a wide range of operative qualitative distinctions. Beyond this it also has *depth* as evidenced most clearly by Taylor's notion of "constitutive goods." The idea here is that we not only try to get clear on *what* is good but also *why* the good is, in fact, good. These accounts try to get behind the good, as it were, and expand on our understanding of the context in which that good is taken to be good. Taylor doesn't have in mind a natural scientific explanation of human morality; such an account "in no way makes clearer *what is good or admirable about what we seek*."[617]

As we mentioned earlier, one of the distinguishing features of the "basic reasons" view of reasoning is that the reasons are "asymmetrical." The presumption then is that Taylor's alternate conception advances a *non-asymmetrical* view. What would that mean? The key idea, as I read Taylor, is that reasons as articulations *amplify* our understanding of what is at stake in acting a certain way. They cast it in a light that expands on our understanding of what is going on. It is a kind of *enriching contextualization* that sets an action within a broader understanding that informs how we see the act. The new description captured in the articulation "gives a fuller, more vivid, or clearer, better-defined understanding of what the good is."[618] Here it is important that the new articulation need not be distinctively philosophical. As we discussed in chapter three, for Taylor we articulate the good in many different ways, i.e., "that the forms of articulacy are more widely varied, that philosophical definition is one mode, but that our understanding (including philosophical understanding) would be badly impoverished without moral narrative and admiring attention to exemplars."[619] We can expand on the sense or meaning of a moral action by seeing it through the prism of narratives or in light of exemplars. These unpack and give a fuller sense to the goodness or wrongness of an act at hand. The key point here is that only within this broader context can we grasp why a given moral rule matters. The good is prior to the right in the sense that the normative gravity of judgments of the 'right' can only be grasped within various levels of embedding within the good.

---

[617] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 73.
[618] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 74.
[619] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 75.

Even if morality's "meaning" or "significance" can only be captured by embedding it within a multi-leveled conception of the good, why does this mean that we cannot have a procedural moral theory? The answer is Taylor's pluralism. Procedural moral theories are structurally incapable of recognizing the plurality of goods that a eudaimonistic perspective can. He writes, "A procedural ethic of rules cannot cope with the prospect that the sources of good might be plural. A single valid procedure grinds out the rules, and if it works properly it will not generate contradictory injunctions; just as a well-ordered formal system won't generate contradictory theorems."[620] He adds,

> Concentrating on the principles of action, and having a penchant for a unitary conception of the 'moral', based on a single criterion, it can't even properly conceive of the kind of diversity of goods, which underlies the conflict. Where there is some sense of the special status of the hypergood, this is disguised in some doctrine about the special logical properties of moral language or the presuppositions of discourse.[621]

By articulating the meaning, significance, or point of moral rules in terms of the good, the normative force is spread throughout a field a qualitative distinctions, and thus ceases to have the unitary structure attributed to it by mainstream moral theories.

It's noteworthy that another infamous critic of moral theory agrees more or less with Taylor's position up to this point. While he lacks Taylor's rich notion of moral articulacy grounded in a hermeneutical conception of the human agent, Bernard Williams shares the sentiment that it's hard to see why one should live according to modern moral theories, i.e., they don't make clear what's good about it. In his words,

> I particularly agree with him…that it is typical of modern moral theories that they lack the resources to display their own *ethical appeal*…Taylor himself would like to mobilize these richer ethical resources in terms of conceptions of the good, which are partly to be understood in historical and psychological terms—kinds of understanding (again we agree) that moral philosophy needs to use if it is to have any hope of understanding itself.[622]

But Taylor's conception of the good is far richer than Williams is willing to countenance. More specifically, it's Taylor's more Platonic and Christian moments that worry Williams. He writes:

---

[620] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 39; cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 704-706.

[621] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 102.

[622] Bernard Williams, "Replies," in *World, Mind, and Ethics*, 203, italics mine; also see Bernard Williams "Republican and Galilean: Review of *Sources of the Self*," *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 17 (November 8, 1990): 45-7, http://www.www.nybooks.com/articles/3461 (accessed November 14, 2009).

> In Taylor's own work, the idea of what it is 'good to love' is at least as important as ideas of what it is good to do or be. It is in terms of what it is good to love that he has formulated notions of the power of the good, notions which carry Platonic or Christian resonances. Some time before this point is reached, Taylor will rightly have expected me to part from him, suspicious of the 'siren songs of old metaphysical bird-catchers', in Nietzsche's words, calling 'you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!' In these connections his views, for me, are too removed from naturalism.[623]

While Williams bucks against the apparently Christian-Platonic moment in Taylor's thinking, I want to read the insistence on the importance of loving the good as continuous with the general hermeneutical argument developed by Taylor. The reason that loving the good is an essential topic in moral philosophy (*contra* "division of labor" theorists) is that it is integral to the context/backdrop that makes morality intelligible. There is indeed a distinctively Christian moment in Taylor's insistence on love, but this occurs at the level of articulating a vision of the good and not at the level of meta-ethical critique. To this we shall now turn.

## 4.6 Loving the Good?

The above sections detailed a reading of Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy as resting on a thesis of ethical holism, i.e., the idea that we cannot understand morally right action in the terms popular among contemporary theorists but rather must re-embed our understanding of morality in the rich, thick, dense material of the good. In this section I want to extend this interpretation of Taylor's argument to his comments regarding the importance of not just *being good* but also *loving the good*. The question facing us is the following: why can't we understand morality without reference to the love of the good? In what sense could loving the good be considered a fundamental part of our ethical predicament and moral consciousness? And even if we do recognize this as an essential feature of the moral life, why should we think that it disrupts "division of labor" approaches to morality? In other words, why should this count as a strike against contemporary theory?

---

[623] Williams, "Replies," 203. Additionally, he questions Taylor's notion of 'strong evaluation.' He writes, "It is interesting that Taylor…should move rapidly in the direction of a more deeply ethical kind of importance, one that corresponds to what he calls 'strong evaluation', and to value rather than to mere desire" (205).

Understanding Taylor's insistence on the centrality of loving the good is complicated by several overlapping yet disambiguated uses of the term 'love.' For starters, in many contexts Taylor is working with a very broad conception of 'love.' In this usage, "loving the good" is synonymous with "respect"[624] for or "allegiance"[625] to the good, i.e., a kind of general, positive orientation towards a conception of the most significant or meaningful, regardless of how exactly it is construed. Given the wide range of emotional responses that Taylor draws on here, 'love' functions as an umbrella term for a spectrum of positive motivations rather than a designation for a specific kind of emotion or relation. Other times, however, Taylor's talk of "love" moves into a distinctively Christian register by stressing the allegedly unique motivational resources of *agape* love.[626]

Distinguishing between two phases of Taylor's argument in moral philosophy—namely, his critique of modern moral philosophy and Taylor's own conception of the good rooted in the Catholic tradition—helps us organize and thereby make better sense of Taylor's insistence on the importance of loving the good. The first phase of his argument seeks to subvert the overly restrictive meta-ethical assumptions governing contemporary theory and open a space for moral articulacy. Upon clearing this broader space, Taylor moves to articulate his own conception of the good. This is the second phase of his moral philosophy. Distinguishing between two stages of Taylor's moral philosophy illuminates the role of love in Taylor's moral philosophy by situating his two usages of 'love' within two different moments. The broad sense of 'love' as synonymous with 'devotion' or 'allegiance' occurs during his attack on the meta-ethical assumptions governing contemporary moral theories. Here the argument is that no moral theory can be intelligible if it separates morally right action from a conception of the good, including both a conception of human flourishing as well as commitment, allegiance, or devotion to the good. The second sense of 'love' as the Christian notion of *agape* comes into play during the second phase of his argument, i.e., as an argument for the

---

[624] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 96.
[625] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 79.
[626] See Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections*, 185-186; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516-521; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 737-743.

superiority of a certain conception of the good, specifically its motivational robustness. This counts as a particular argument for a specific view of the good.

At the heart of Taylor's insistence on the centrality of love is an attempt to put questions concerning moral motivation on the table. Anglo-American moral philosophy does, of course, raise certain questions related to moral motivation, but these discussions usually remain confined to whether or not moral reasons can motivate. The standard debates over so-called motivational internalism and externalism, however, neglect the deeper questions of the motivational dynamics of the moral life that Taylor is trying to recover. What are these often overlooked issues? His driving concern is twofold: (a) to reveal how the broad sense of love (that is, as respect for or allegiance to the good) is at work in modern moral theory, even if it neglects or denies it and (b) to open a debate regarding how different kinds of motivational sources affect living out of the moral life.

Why should we think that the love of the good is at work even in procedural moral theories?[627] In other words, why ought we to think that they are "inarticulate" with regard to their own moral motivations such that "division of labor" approaches cannot be a plausible strategy? Taylor's answer, as I read him, is that love of the good is an essential dimension of the broader context within which moral obligation is situated. To draw on our earlier discussion, love of the good counts as a feature of the moral "background" of our lives, and as such, it plays a crucial role in making intelligible the normative draw of morality, i.e., it functions as a condition for appreciating morality's seriousness.[628] It may not be the object of much explicit attention, but without it, the meaning involved in our explicit attention to morally right action breaks down.

What exactly does Taylor mean by talk of 'loving the good'? The beginnings of an answer to this question are found in Taylor's concept of a "moral source,"[629] which he introduces as that thing

---

[627] This point is suggested, among other places, by Taylor's comment: "The constitutive good does more than just define the content of the moral theory. Love of it is what empowers us to be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being. This is now part of the content of the moral theory as well, which includes injunctions not only to act in certain ways and to exhibit certain moral qualities but also to love what is good." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

[628] See the discussion in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[629] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 4.

we love when we love the good. That which is loved exerts its own gravity on the moral agent. Part of the experience of 'love' is being drawn to, feeling the pull of the beloved, even if one cannot express what it is that is responsible for this feeling. Love isn't simply conferred by the choice of the lover but feels itself to be responsive to the beloved. Taylor's notion of a 'moral source' picks up on this dimension of the phenomenology of love, i.e., it functions as that which is loved but also that which energizes our love. He writes, "That is, there is something relation to which defines certain actions and motives as higher…and our contemplation of this can inspire a motive which empowers us to live up to what is higher."[630] He continues, "Moral sources empower. To come closer to them, to have a clearer view of them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better enabled to live up to them."[631]

As the above quotes reveal, Taylor's conception closely links issues of moral motivation (specifically, 'moral sources') with whatever it is that "defines certain actions and motives as higher" (what he calls 'constitutive goods'). As we mentioned above, this specialized meta-ethical concept is meant to draw our attention to the background understanding of the world such that certain good things are taken to be good. They explain what makes the good life an object that is worthy of pursuit. For those doubting the importance that loving the good plays in a modern ethic, Taylor begins by reminding us that "empowering images and stories function in our time."[632] Narratives of exemplary virtue, human compassion, and self-sacrifice, among other things, "go on pointing to something which remains for us a moral source, something the contemplation, respect, or love of which enables us to get closer to what is good."[633] Crucial to Taylor's argument is the way various stories and theories incorporate "pictures of the human predicament," precisely the sort of thing Taylor's notion of constitutive goods is meant to capture. These overarching conceptions of our place in the world incorporate a sense of what is of highest value. These background understandings

---

[630] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 95.
[631] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 96.
[632] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 95.
[633] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 95-96.

of self and world frame our understanding of the good life and also serve as objects of our love, commitment, respect, or allegiance. This feature of the moral life isn't something the ancients had and we lack, but rather it is exhibited in modern, immanent conceptions of good, e.g., the dignity of the rational agent (Kant)[634] or the courage shown in facing up to the absurdity of a meaningless world (Camus).[635] The various conceptions of the moral world exert a gravitational pull on us. In casting the concept of 'moral sources,' Taylor means to illuminate general features of the moral life shared by ancients and moderns, theists and atheists. He tells us, "Even in the most anti-theological and anti-metaphysical ethic there is such a moment of the recognition of something which is not made or decided by human beings, and which shows a certain way of being to be good and admirable."[636] The claim here is thus that all moral agents inhabit some kind of moral world, even if it is a thoroughly disenchanted one. And the nature of this ultimate context is linked in some way, according to Taylor, with what we take to be of ultimate value. The general relation of moral agents to this value is what he describes in the most generic sense as 'love.'

These are the sources of love to which Taylor seeks to draw our attention in coining the notion of a 'moral source.' As he puts it, "The Good is also that the love of which moves us to good action. The constitutive good is a moral source, in the sense I want to use this term here: that is, it is a something the love of which empowers us to do and be good."[637] Taylor thinks we are drawn towards that which makes the good things good. It is a source in a double sense—namely, as a *source of value* (constitutive good) as well as a *source of motivation* (moral source). These two senses of 'source' are indeed connected for Taylor. How should we see the connection between these two senses of being a 'source'? In other words, how do we make sense of the link between our conception of the

---

[634] He writes, "In Kant's theory, rational agency is the constitutive good…As the Kantian case shows, an entirely immanent view of the good is compatible with recognizing that there is something the contemplation of which commands our respect, which respect in turn empowers. Whatever fills this role is playing the part of a moral source; it has an analogous place in the ethical life of Kantians to that of the idea of the Good among Platonists. The move to an immanent ethic doesn't mean that this role stops being played." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 94.

[635] See Charles Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 212; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 582-589.

[636] Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," 212.

[637] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

"human predicament" (constitutive goods) and its power to inspire our love of the good (moral sources)?

We might conceive of the link as the power of some kinds explicit reflection to shore up or bolster our commitment to certain values. Think of how renewed attention to an ideal can reinvigorate our commitment to being good. Is this the motivational power he has in mind? Moral sources can indeed function in this way as the content of a particular instance of moral reflection, but it would be hard to see how this construal of moral sources could lay claim to the sort of necessity presupposed by Taylor's critique. Couldn't a decent yet unreflective individual live a life without ever consciously engaging in the meta-ethical speculation involved in this kind of thought? As Nick Smith puts it:

> It is quite conceivable that a person can live a recognizable human life, a life informed by some conception of the good, without reflecting on constitutive goods or contacting them in some other way. Contact with moral sources may be desirable for living a fully human life. It may heighten our experience or strengthen our motivation to meet certain standards. But it does not follow that moral sources are necessary for moral life. It does not entail that they are an essential component of moral motivation.[638]

This leads Smith to conclude that moral sources play an optional role in moral thinking: "Moral sources may be *enabling* conditions for the realization of strong values; but an enabling condition is quite distinct from an *indispensability* condition."[639] If this is how we read Taylor's insistence on the centrality of love, it's hard to see why procedural moral theory would amount to a distortion of the ethical life. It might miss out on additional motivational tools, but it's hard to see why loving the good would count as a necessary part of the moral life.

By contrast, we might read the link between our love of the good and the constitutively good as a matter of "motivational transfer," as Arto Laitinen has suggested. The idea here is that our love for the good rubs off on other matters imbuing them with motivational power. He describes the connection as follows:

> It was not the goal itself that motivated us, but our love for the loved one. Yet a genuine motivational transfer is possible: because of this, we get attached to the goal as well…In

---

[638] See Smith, *Charles Taylor,* 116-119, quote from p. 116; cf. Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 289.
[639] Smith, *Charles Taylor,* 117.

> pursuing the goal, we feel connected to the loved one. It is this connection that gives meaning to our actions and inspires us to act…This would then be the structure of all moral motivation…It is a striking feature of this model of moral motivation, that bearers of intrinsic value have no motivating role. For instance, if I am convinced that God is the source of the significance of the welfare of animals, what motivates me to promote animal welfare is my relation to God, not the welfare of animals itself…we are motivated or empowered to help a suffering animal by some moral source (viz., our capacities), not by seeing for example the suffering of the animal itself.[640]

Here the source of value and source of motivation are both the same. As a result, the relationship between constitutive goods and ordinary life goods is pictured as a sort of one-way pipeline where the motivational force flows from its source to various spigots further down the pipe. Constitutive goods function, on this reading, as the sole locus of both value and motivational power.[641]

But this cannot be what Taylor has in mind. Recall the interplay of interpretation and emotion at the heart of Taylor's moral psychology.[642] Moral consciousness emerges for Taylor in the experience of certain emotional responses to values presented in interpretation, which in turn shapes the initial feeling. The idea here is one of an indefinitely perpetual dialectic between our moral emotions and the articulations that make sense of them. Taylor's notion of a 'moral source' builds upon but does not overturn this basic structure in Taylor's rendering of the moral life. Constitutive goods amplify our initial felt responses to value which exist prior to the interpretation, albeit in a less determinate manner. Without an initial moral-emotional response in and to particular situations, there would be nothing that the moral source could illuminate. Thus we cannot see moral sources as "transferring" the motivational power of constitutive goods to lower-level goods that lack their own motivational power. Qualitative distinctions both express values and moral motivations that have an existence independent of higher-order constitutive goods and moral sources, although these broader frames exert a shaping influence on the extensions of these lower level concepts.[643]

---

[640] Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 287-8

[641] Such reflections lead Laitinen to abandon the notions of 'constitutive goods' and 'moral sources.' His main reasons are that there's no intelligible way to make sense of multiple sources of the good, i.e., a plurality of constitutive goods, and that the concept does no intellectual work. See Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, chapter 7, especially 273-279.

[642] This is discussed at length in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

[643] Charles Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 317-318.

Moral sources are not simply givens but emerge in the course of the collective articulation of our moral feelings; they "only exist for us through *some* articulation."[644] In other words, "A vision of the good becomes available for the people of a given culture through being given expression in some manner."[645] As in his early essays on moral psychology where emotion and interpretation are bound up in a mutually shaping dynamic, the notion of a 'moral source' involves a back and forth movement between the initial feeling and an interpretation that shapes that feeling. Moral sources are articulations of our love that in turn move us to love. Taylor writes, "articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power."[646] The implication is that we cannot say, as Laitinen seems to suggest, that moral sources simply "transfer" motivational force to our evaluative responses. Such an account overlooks the way pre-existing value disclosed through our emotions can motivate and yet still be *amplified* by further moral articulation. It would be better to say that the "moral source" frames a lower-level good and thereby *brings into focus* and *further expresses* the motivational force that was there in the initial evaluative response. Moral sources, on my reading of Taylor, are continuous with his hermeneutical moral psychology, and count as an elaboration or amplification of his original idea. In both cases the moral domain is opened to us through a certain emotional response that is refracted through and modified by our broader interpretation. In the case of 'moral sources,' Taylor shows how our broadest, biggest-picture articulations of the world serve to re-affirm, strengthen, and intensify our devotion to the good.[647]

Moreover, additional textual evidence suggests that the claim that constitutive goods are the sole source of value and motivation of other goods is not the best reading of Taylor's position. Such a reading runs flatly contrary to Taylor's characterization of the relationship in terms of the Rawlsian notion of "reflective equilibrium." He writes:

---

[644] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 91.

[645] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 91.

[646] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92; he adds, "A formulation has power when it brings the source closer, when it makes it plain and evident, in all its inherent force, its capacity to inspire our love, respect, or allegiance. An effective articulation releases this force, and this is how words have power." (96)

[647] He writes, "Moral sources empower. To come closer to them, to have a clearer view of them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better enabled to live up to them." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 96.

> A constitutive good can show itself as such by its capacity to empower us morally. This is not the whole story, of course. Our (a) acknowledgment of the power of constitutive goods functions in a field of moral assessment along with our (b) antecedent sense of what is right, and our (c) identification of the possible illusions which could vitiate our moral intuitions. None of these has primacy. It is a matter of achieving reflective equilibrium, to use the Rawlsian term.[648]

On Taylor's picture then we move between lower-level judgments of moral significance, including judgments of what is morally right, and higher-order understandings of our moral world. This picture of the back and forth readjustment of moral values gives us a further reason to reject the one-way picture of the flow of moral value assumed in Laitinen's reading of moral sources.

The articulating moral agent, however, does not exist in a historical vacuum. Rather, her moral responses have already been shaped by appearing on the scene of an existing moral world. The large historical chunks of both *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* tell the story of the emergence and transformation of "our" moral world. Taylor's history has come under fire from many directions. As critics rightly point out, his story focuses exclusively on the history of only parts of Europe and North America (Nussbaum), breezes passed Neo- and Renaissance-Platonism (Clark), mostly ignores American Pragmatism (Joas), and neglects the material underpinnings of intellectual culture (Skinner).[649] While these critics are right to point out the limits of Taylor's history, these criticisms don't vitiate the idea of moral sources. Rather they push us to tell richer, more nuanced, more inclusive stories to make sense of the various products of articulation that exert an ethical influence on moral agents in our shared, yet fractured and contested moral world.[650] We need better histories rather than ahistorical accounts. If Taylor is right, we cannot properly understand our own motivations by treating morality in a historical vacuum. Theory by itself fails to make sense of

---

[648] Taylor, "Reply to Commentators," 213. Contrary to Joas's reading, Taylor's talk here of the "antecedent sense of what is right" does not mean that neither the 'right' nor the 'good' has conceptual priority. Rather the 'right' still must be understood in light of the 'good' to grasp its meaning. We still spell out the "point" of moral rules by reference to the good, but those judgments both inform and are informed by our bigger picture conceptions of what is of ultimate value. For a differing view see Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* 172-176.

[649] See Quentin Skinner, "Who Are 'We'? Ambiguities of the Modern Self," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 133-153 reprinted with modifications as Quentin Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, 37-48; Nussbaum, "Our Pasts, Ourselves," 31-32; Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* 140-142; Clark, "Taylor's Waking Dream," 206-208.

[650] Joas notes such a course of response: "It is quite possible that Taylor will understand many of these suggestion as only offering material that would supplement his work, and not as objections to his argumentation as such." Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* 141.

morally right action because the very substance of morality's attraction remains opaque to it. Getting a proper view of the matter requires triangulating theory in relation to the broader narratives that inform the "social imaginaries" of moral agents.[651]

Having explained a crucial feature of Taylor's theoretical apparatus, the Platonic moment in his conception of the good, I want to now draw on a distinction made by Christine Korsgaard, which will help us locate Taylor's argument in the broader philosophical landscape and thereby appreciate his distinctive contribution. She distinguishes between "attractive" and "compulsive" conceptions of normativity, i.e., where the 'ought' of morality comes from. The former is thought to describe ancient virtue ethical accounts, while the latter is characteristic of modern theories of obligation. In her words, "obligation differs from excellence in an important way. When we seek excellence, the force that value exerts upon us is *attractive*; when we are obligated, it is *compulsive*. For obligation is the imposition of value on a reluctant, recalcitrant, resistant matter."[652] Taylor's insistence on the central importance of loving the good, as I read him, is bound up with his attempt to rehabilitate a modern version of an "attractive" conception of normativity. Love is an agent's response to the attractive source of value in the world. The point, however, isn't that we can revive an "attractive" conception of normativity by re-enchanting the world. Rather, Taylor's point is that the attraction of the good never left the modern world, although its content underwent changes in the course of historical development. His charge of modern moral "inarticulacy" is that contemporary theorists cannot help but have a Platonic moment, i.e., being drawn to a substantial ideal animating more austere theories. Modern moral ideals like autonomy, the value the ordinary life of production and consumption, and individual self-expression are themselves all objects of moral love in the sense Taylor is trying to

---

[651] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-176; He first introduces this term in Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004). This notion is discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[652] Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 4, italics mine. See also Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values,* trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 184.

capture, and they are disclosed in big-picture narratives of the human condition.[653] Even

contemporary moral theories rest on an ignored, suppressed moment of normative attraction. As he

puts it, "defenders of the most antiseptic procedural ethic are unavowedly inspired by visions of the

good."[654] This is one of the ways in which modern moral philosophy is "inarticulate." In grounding

moral thinking in something like formal rationality, it papers over the crucial moment in which love

plays a defining role for moral thinking.

By insisting on the centrality of loving the good Taylor points us back to the way in which

moral ideals embedded in broader world conceptions play an essential role in energizing, so to speak,

the moral life. We shouldn't think of 'moral sources' as involving a necessary moment of explicit

reflection on the source of value, as we mentioned above. Rather, they count as shared contexts

necessary for making the moral life of our world intelligible. The necessity of 'moral sources' attaches

to what it means to inhabit a moral world. Our understanding of the "background" of our historical

moral world is, of course, caught up in the hermeneutical predicament and is therefore open to

perpetual contestation and revision. While the content of our 'moral sources' is one of contingent

historical developments, the structure of 'moral sources' is itself a necessary one. One purpose of

Taylor's argument is illuminate the broader contexts in which moral considerations take on their

significance both at the level of theory and intellectual history. Moral articulacy requires awareness of

this broader context. The necessity of moral sources thus shouldn't be sought *contra* Smith in

transcendental conditions for our agency but rather in the necessity involved in making sense of our

actual, albeit contingent moral-historical world.[655]

---

[653] This forms the bulk of the historical project in Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and Taylor's *A Secular Age*. The need for a positive account of the substantive vision of modernity is prefigured in Taylor, "Introduction," in *Human Agency and Language*, 4-8.

[654] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 504.

[655] We need to distinguish between the necessity claimed for the category of 'moral sources' in making sense of our moral world and history used to fill in the details. A failure to make this mistake haunts the "practical-nonontological" account offered by Mark Redhead. His view attributes a false fixity to Taylor's contentful reading of 'moral sources' that belongs, as I read Taylor, only to the need for a notion of 'moral sources' as such, even if what those sources are and how those sources are described remains contingent and contested. Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 212-217.

The issue of moral motivation surfaces in yet another way in Taylor's polemic against modern moral philosophy. Contemporary moral theories are premised on the idea, according to Taylor, that "we can establish the 'principles' by which we can select the right action without reference to the kind of motivation that might be sufficient to carry it out."[656] But Taylor thinks that neglecting deeper issues of moral motivation results in a superficial understanding of our ethical predicament, which threatens the viability of our moral codes. By abstracting questions of moral obligation from the dense psychological material in which the moral life takes hold, the "minimalist rules" generated by contemporary theories cannot help but be "inherently morally instable."[657] Taylor's point is that we need to consider "the issue of the deeper motivation needed to carry though on the code."[658] He adds, "It seems we need a stronger ethic, a firmer identification with the common good, more solidarity, if we are really to enter the promised land of a self-sustaining ethical code, or even meet the basic condition of the modern moral order, that our interaction really be of mutual benefit."[659] The issue here is thus whether moral theory can be an effective guide to ethical living, if it brackets deeper questions about what kind of motivations are needed for living the moral life, a question that necessarily takes us beyond obligatory action.

Here Taylor's argument intersects with the work of a number of prominent writers like Mark Johnson, Owen Flanagan, and John Cottingham who worry that moral psychology has been hived off from mainstream moral theory to the detriment of our understanding of the moral life.[660] In a passage with strong Taylorian resonances, Cottingham describes the alienation of contemporary moral theory from moral psychology as follows:

> Good actions, modern ethicists tell us, are those we have reason to perform right actions are those we have conclusive reason to perform; but implicit in the philosophical literature one often finds a curious kind of Socratic optimism, as if morality consisted in a proper grasp of the relevant array of reasons, and a firm disposition to act on them. Perhaps it does, but *until*

---

[656] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 58.

[657] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 691.

[658] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 703.

[659] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 692.

[660] See especially, See Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), chapter 1 and chapter 2.

*this abstract picture is supplemented with a deeper moral psychology, its relevance to any plausible theory of the good life must remain pretty thin.*[661]

A failure to consider moral motivations results in a gap between theory and practice that renders the theory irrelevant. We cannot get an adequate view of human flourishing unless we also consider the way in which moral principles are integrated into the messy psychological reality of concrete individuals. Taylor expresses this concern through an analysis of various kinds of motivational failure.[662] He writes, for instance, "Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy—the love of the human—can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off or, worse, continues but is invested now with these new feelings, becoming progressively more coercive and inhumane."[663] Taylor worries that our own pursuit of justice can come to demonize others and our moral passion transfigured into something abhorrent:

> This indignation comes to be fueled by hatred for those who support and connive with these injustices, which in turn is fed by our sense of superiority that we are not like these instruments and accomplices of evil. Soon, we are blinded to the havoc we wreak around us. Our picture of the world has safely located all evil outside us. We must never relent but, on the contrary, double our energy, vie with each other in indignation and denunciation…it is clear that modern humanism is full of potential for such disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way. And the higher the flight, the farther the potential fall.[664]

We can read Taylor here as making a criticism of the relationship between theory and practice in contemporary ethical thought. The problem is that theories of moral obligation assume that they can straightforwardly translate their principles of right into ethical practice. The underlying message of Taylor's criticism is that a closer look at the motivational life of human beings casts doubt on this assumption. His argument forces us to confront how various motivators can succeed, fail, and sabotage our pursuit of the good. If the dynamics of moral motivation are as Taylor describes, it is naïve for moral theorists to bracket questions of motivation. What I'm calling "division of labor"

---

[661] John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 141, italics mine.

[662] See Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 182-185; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516-519; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 696-699.

[663] Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 183.

[664] Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 184-5.

approaches to morality and the good fail precisely because they neglect the broader motivational

context within which moral theory can be lived out.

This leads Taylor to the following question: what best motivates the moral life? In an

infamous line Taylor tells us, "High standards need strong sources."[665] At this point Taylor finds

modern moral philosophy lacking and raises the issue of "whether we are not living beyond our

moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence."[666]  At this point

Taylor moves to suggest the motivational robustness of the Christian notion of *agape* love as a

motivational source for backing our modern moral commitments to universal benevolence and

justice.[667] His argument here, however, is mostly suggestive and under-developed. As he admits, it is

more of a "hunch" than a worked out argument.[668] Assessing this second phase of Taylor's project

takes us beyond the scope of this dissertation.

For our purposes, I want to simply note how Taylor's defense of *agape* is best seen in light of

a broader view of his moral philosophy that identifies two phases—his critique of modern moral

philosophy and an articulation of his positive vision. This later discussion doesn't even get off the

ground without first opening up questions previously "occluded by the dominance of proceduralist

meta-ethics, which makes us see these commitments through the prism of moral

obligation…pushing the moral sources further out of sight."[669] Only when we establish the necessity

of embedding our understanding of morality within the motivational dynamics of concrete agents

can Taylor's defense of *agape* take hold. Here again appeal to the two-phase reading of Taylor's moral

philosophy illuminates the logical structure of his position. The first phase of his argument, i.e., his

critique of modern moral philosophy, broadens the space of ethical discussion by revealing the

inadequacies inherent in disconnecting our understanding of moral obligation from the tumultuous,

---

[665] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516.

[666] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 517.

[667] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 516-519; Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" 185.

[668] Taylor writes, for instance, "I have a *hunch* that there is a scale of affirmation of humanity by God which cannot be matched by humans rejecting God. *But I am far from having proof*. Let's try to see." Charles Taylor, "Reply and Re-articulation," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, eds. James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994), 226, italics mine. I'm indebted to conversations with David McPherson for keeping this dimension of Taylor's thought in my view.

[669] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518.

messy and sometimes duplicitous motivational psychologies of concrete agents. Taylor's meta-ethic puts these questions on the table. This enables Taylor to advance an argument for the motivational supremacy of a certain articulation of the good, one that places *agape* at the center.[670]

## 4.7 Implications for Moral Theory

Having sketched the various strands making up what I have called the strong reading of Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy, we are now in a position to draw these together. Why is it exactly that we cannot accept a procedural moral theory? First, if Taylor is right, we cannot properly understand the moral motivations of modern ethical thought from within moral theories themselves. They themselves are inexorably caught up in broader cultural movements and bigger narratives. In Taylor's terminology, moral theory cannot be divorced from the "moral sources" that have been given articulation in the course of historical development. As a consequence, the very project of constructing a moral system loses its plausibility for the various historical narratives at play are un-systematizable in nature. If what Taylor says here about the origins of value are correct, we cannot plausibly expect procedural theory to tidy up moral thinking in any grand way. At best, theory could contribute to smaller problems so long as these are always framed in a broader understanding that outstrips theory. As a result, these procedural moral theories "are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking."[671] In other words, "modern philosophy has generated a shyness, to the point of inarticulacy, about these goods."[672]

---

[670] This two phase strategy gives us some leverage in responding to criticisms of Taylor's moral philosophy that take issue with the influence of theism on his thought. By distinguishing his critique of modern moral philosophy from his positive vision of ethics, we can appreciate how his critique facilitates but is logically distinct from his defense of an ethics rooted in *agape*. The former makes a space for moral articulacy; the latter is an articulation within that space. For criticisms of the religious dimension of Taylor's ethics see Skinner, "Who Are 'We'? Ambiguities of the Modern Self," 133-53; Judith N. Shklar, "Review of Sources of the Self," *Political Theory* 19 (February 1991): 105-109; Charles Larmore, "Review of Sources of the Self," *Ethics* 102 (October 1991): 158-162; Williams, "Republican and Galilean." For another response to these critics that stresses Taylor's ethical pluralism, especially with regard to religious conceptions, see Michael L. Morgan, "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, 49-66.

[671] Taylor, "A most peculiar institution," 151.

[672] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 35.

Second, looking at moral obligations from the standpoint of the good does not leave everything as it was. Rather it brings about a sea change for ethical thinking. As we noted above, a proceduralistic conception of moral theory is allied with certain unifying tendencies well known in modern moral thinking. By contrast, a substantive conception of moral theory is bound up with a pluralistic conception of the human good.[673] Taylor's introduction of the notion of 'moral sources' shows how deep the conflicts run and how competing objects of moral love can exert an influence on us. It's not just that we have a great assortment of heterogenous evaluative categories that express a range of different goods, but rather, these spring from quite different underlying conceptions of moral reality.[674] Our modern condition is living in the historical wake of these great narratives placing the moral agent, and these continue to exert an pull on us. As Taylor puts it, "the moral conflicts of modern culture rage within each of us."[675] While Taylor's argument reveals the depth of modernity's ethical conflicts, Taylor remains upbeat. Recognizing the deeper roots of our ethical predicament points the way towards a "reconciliation" of the various goods:

> I believe that such a reconciliation is possible; but its essential condition is that we enable ourselves to recognize the goods to which we cannot but hold allegiance in their full range. If articulacy is open to 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 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 sacrifices 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.[676]

Even if Taylor's history is needs correcting, deepening, broadening, the result is to make theory even less plausible. It does, however, have the benefit of making these conflicts more intelligible. It provides a meta-ethical framework that makes perspicuous the role that diverging conceptions of the good play in the moral life. While it may "reconcile" various goods by placing them in a common framework, it remains unclear how a stronger kind of "reconciliation" is possible. Indeed, this leaves us with two unresolved problems. How does the deliberating agent make sense of a "plurality of

---

[673] Taylor, "Justice After Virtue," 39.
[674] See Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*, 120.
[675] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 106.
[676] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 107.

goods,"[677] and why should goods like justice and benevolence be given any special place? Addressing these questions will require us to engage with what I earlier called the weak reading of Taylor's thesis of ethical holism. It is to this topic we shall now turn.

---

[677] This phrase is found in, among other places, Charles Taylor, "Plurality of Goods," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* , ed., Mark Lillla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert B. Silvers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 113-119.

## Chapter 5: Taylor's Critique of Procedural Moral Theory II:

## Morality, Meaning, and the Holism of Deliberation

In this chapter I want to return to the "division of labor" approach to moral philosophy

defended by Will Kymlicka and (with subtle variation) Jürgen Habermas. They maintain that

questions of the good life and moral obligation can and ought to be separated from each other.[678]

Habermas even goes so far as to suggest that modern moral philosophy must learn to be content

with formally analyzing 'morality' and give up "the question of why we should be moral *at all*."[679]

This chapter will attempt to show why we cannot accept a "division of labor" approach to morality

by developing what I have called the weak reading of Taylor's ethical holism. A divide and conquer

strategy fails not only because the 'right' implicitly relies on its own view of the good, as we saw in

chapter four, but also because moral agents must be able to understand how morality fits into a life

lived in pursuit of the good.[680] Moral articulacy demands deliberative holism, i.e., a broader

perspective of how practical deliberation works than is allowed by the "division of labor" model.

Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy can be understood as a rejection of "the

priority of the right over the good."[681] In chapter four we looked at one sense of this expression

criticized by Taylor—namely, that giving the right (morality) priority over the good (ethics) is

incoherent or, more specifically, "inarticulate" because no moral theory could itself defend its claim

to normative authority without appeal to a conception of the good. In this chapter we will take up

another sense of "the priority of the right over the good" as expressed in the claim that "what is

important in ethical life is the obligations we have to others, e.g., to fair dealing and benevolence, and

that these are incomparably more weighty than the requirements of the good, or fulfilled, or valuable,

---

[678] See Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 170; Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 3-4.

[679] Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" 4. Also see Jürgen Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Freedom*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 211.

[680] This point most clearly comes out in  Charles Taylor, "Comments and Replies," *Inquiry* 34 (1991), 244-245.

[681] For this phrase and its three senses see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 532-3n66.

or worthwhile life."[682] This claim intersects with the work of the so-called "morality critics."[683] These thinkers complain that the demands placed on moral agents by modern moral theory make it difficult to lead a good and meaningful life. In an attempt to resolve this problem, an influential strain of philosophers including notably Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf have sought to reorient moral philosophy around the individual pursuit of the good life and downgrade morality's status in practical deliberation. Morality, they tell us, may be important but it is only one of a number of important factors that needs to be considered in deciding how to live. When looked at from a broader deliberative perspective, morality is no longer automatically the most important consideration in play.

Taylor's critique of modern moral inarticulacy grapples with the same issues but offers, in the end, a different diagnosis and solution to the purported conflict of meaning and morality. The root of the problematic relationship between morality and the good life, according to Taylor, is the "procedural" conception of morality dominating contemporary moral theory. This kind of approach attempts to pick out a distinctive kind of consideration—a *moral* consideration—with a fundamental principle of practical reasoning that is invested with great authority in practical thinking. Rather than demoting morality, Taylor breaks apart the narrow category of morality into a wide variety of competing goods that need to be reconciled a broad deliberative view taken over the course of a whole life. Overarching this deliberation between goods is a more general orientation toward the good life. This unifies, at least to some extent, the overall framework for deliberation. Taylor further deviates from his counterparts in the general Anglo-American discussion by recognizing that certain class of goods, called "hypergoods," lay a heavier claim on moral agents. It is in virtue of their greater *significance* rather than their procedural status, Taylor underscores, that they lay a legitimate claim to deliberative priority. It is Taylor's rehabilitation of the concept of "importance" within practical deliberation that defines his re-tooled ancient meta-ethic.

---

[682] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 532-3n66.
[683] See Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," *Ethics* 107 (January 1997): 252-262; Robert Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), Introduction and chapter 5.

Unlike in chapter four where Taylor's argument sought to establish that "the good is always primary to the right,"[684] here the argument is different. It doesn't seek to establish the priority of the good in the sense that personal fulfillments of various kinds would always win out over moral values.[685] Rather the aim is to establish the weaker, more sensible claim that they *need not always* win out. In other words, the good (glossed in this way) doesn't necessarily trounce the right. Negating 'the priority of the right over the good' doesn't itself establish the 'priority of the good' taken in the sense that goods of personal fulfillment are more important than justice, fairness, charity, and so on. Rather it opens a reflective space that recognizes a wide range of goods and the inescapable need to make judgments of importance, i.e., judgments concerning what is good. Taylor's thesis is that morality must be integrated into the pursuit of a good and meaningful life. By concerning itself strictly with 'right' action, contemporary moral theory fails to show how morality fits into a unified understanding of practical reasoning that concerns itself with more than simply being moral. Taylor's argument thus pushes us towards a broader deliberative perspective that incorporates both the right and the good. Nevertheless, his argument does establish the 'priority of the good' in another sense— namely, both morality and goods of personal meaning must be situated within an overarching conception of life oriented towards the good understood in the basic sense that we must, at the end of the day, make judgments of relative significance/importance in the evaluation of heterogenous goods

These reflections reveal a final and ultimate sense of moral articulacy as deliberation from the perspective of the good unshackled by overriding procedures. In contrast to moral theories that operate with a sharp distinction between the moral right and the ethical good, approaches that theorize the former and leave the latter to fend for itself, Taylor's notion of moral articulacy drives us to an ultimate, unified perspective that deliberates over a wide range of goods with an eye towards what's ultimately significance. It is this idea of ultimate significance that properly orients practical

---

[684] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89.

[685] For a similar point see Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 168.

deliberation. In virtue of specifying an ultimate criterion for selecting 'moral' considerations and granting these considerations overriding status within practical deliberation, procedural moral theories uncouple judgments of ultimate significance from judgments of the morally right. In this way they bring about another sense of moral inarticulacy—the inability to coherently think through deliberation among competing goods.

## 5.1 Williams on Morality and Practical Deliberation

In order to appreciate the force of Taylor's position, we need to place it within a broader philosophical landscape, a horizon of conceptual options. Triangulating Taylor's position between both the positions of Kymlicka and Habermas as well as also critics like Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf will illuminate the strengths of Taylor's position. Having already touched on the divide and conquer strategies of modern moral theorists. I now turn to the critics of morality's authority.

Williams begins his major work *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* by criticizing the standard starting points for moral philosophy. He urges us to return to the general question of "how one should live," a question he attributes to Socrates.[686] This reformulation avoids the common flaw of posing questions in explicitly moral language and thus rigging the question from the outset.[687] The point is thus to step back to the most general deliberative standpoint, where questions are answered "all things considered."  He writes:

> One can of course ask, on a given occasion, 'what should I do from an ethical point of view?' or 'what should I do from a self-interested point of view?'…*At the end of all that, there is the question 'what should I do, all things considered?'* There is only one kind of question to be asked about what to do, of which Socrates' is a very general example, and moral considerations are one kind of consideration that bear on answering it.[688]

---

[686] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), chapter 1, which is entitled "Socrates' Question."

[687] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 4-5, 19. Williams writes, "Socrates' question, then, means 'how has one most reason to live?' In saying earlier that the force of *should* in the question was just *should*, I meant that no prior advantage is built into the question for one kind of reason over another. In particular, there is no special consideration for respectable justifying reasons. If ethical reasons, for instance, emerge importantly in the answer, that will not be because they have simply been selected for by the question" (p. 19).

[688] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 6, italics mine.

Williams could thus fully take on board the point made by Harry Frankfurt that "even after we have accurately identified the commands of the moral law, there still remains—for most of us—the more fundamental practical question of just how important it is to obey them."[689] What Williams calls "Socrates' question" makes explicit precisely this point. While morality may factor into moral life, it doesn't automatically win out in the face of competing concerns. Williams, however, isn't satisfied with the "impersonal" statement of the question ('how should *one* live?') because it entices us "to generalize the *I* and even to adopt, from the force of reflection alone, an ethical perspective."[690] He worries, in other words, that even Socrates' question tempts us to come up with answers for moral agents and neglects or underplays how much practical deliberation has much to do with who *I* am and what matters to *me*. This leads Williams to further radicalize Socrates' starting point. He tells us: "Practical thought is *radically first personal*. It must ask and answer the question 'what shall *I* do?'"[691]

Williams's decision to begin ethical reflection with a non-ethical, personal question of practical deliberation is motivated by longstanding concerns in his work. The point is not to raise the question plaguing the amoralist, who wonders why he or she ought to be moral. This question strikes Williams as neither unsettling nor useful in persuading would-be moral renegades.[692] Rather, the primary purpose of beginning with the general deliberative question for Williams is not to discredit morality, but to show its proper place in life. This is indeed a leitmotif in Williams's thought. By creating a space in which morality might not override competing deliberative considerations, he is attempting to point to a more humane way of thinking about morality's relation to what matters to us, one that recognizes and accommodates a range of ethical concerns.[693]

We find this theme weaved throughout Williams work. In his relatively early essay "A Critique of Utilitarianism," he voices this concern in terms of utilitarianism's inability to

---

[689] See Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), chapter 1, quote from p. 9.

[690] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 4, quote from p. 21.

[691] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 21, italics mine.

[692] See Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), 3-13 and Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 2. As he asks rhetorically, "What will the professor's justification do, when they break down the door, smash his spectacles, take him away?" (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 23).

[693] As he remarks, "Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that things other than itself are important." Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 184.

accommodate personal integrity. The basic problem is that utilitarianism demands of a moral agent

that she maximize the greatest possible happiness without special privilege to the agent herself. But

this means her own personal integrity often gets pushed to the side. As Williams describes the

utilitarian construal of an individual moral agent's life:

> His own substantial projects and commitments come into it, but only as one lot among others—they potentially provide one set of satisfactions among those which he may be able to assist from where he happens to be. He is the agent of the satisfaction system who happens to be at a particular point at a particular time…His own decisions as a utilitarian agent are a function of all the satisfactions which he can affect from where he is: and this means that the projects of others, to an indeterminately great extent, determine his decision.[694]

Since the utilitarian agent must regard herself and her projects as simply one unit in the overall

utilitarian machine, she is alienated from her own personal commitments.[695] This sets up Williams'

famous charge that utilitarianism is fundamentally incompatible with respect or an agent's integrity:

> The point is that he is identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about (or, in some cases, this section of his life—seriousness is not necessarily the same as persistence). It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in the from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action is his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which *his* actions and *his* decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity.[696]

Williams' earliest attack on utilitarianism thus takes issue with the theory's construal of how moral

agents would relate to themselves via the moral theory—namely, as part of a utilitarian machine that

leaves no room to grant special value to one's own projects. Some utilitarians derive permission for

---

[694] Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" in *Utilitarianism For and Against*, ed. J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams (New York: Cambridge UP, 1973), 115.

[695] Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," 116. In Williams' words, "how can a man, as a utilitarian agent, come to regard as one satisfaction among others, and a dispensable one, a project or attitude round which he has built his life, just because someone else's projects have so structured the causal scene that that is how the utilitarian sum comes out?" Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 76-77, 85-89.

[696] Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," 116-117, partially quoted by Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 299. We will discuss Wolf's reading of Williams, a view to which I am both indebted and sympathetic, in § 5.2.

the individual to give greater weight to her own projects/attachments from the principle of utility.[697]

It turns out that, this argument goes, that making personal allowances is best for everyone overall.

But this response won't due. This gives the wrong kind of answer *in principle* because it does not

admit that there are different kinds of value that matter to agents. Instrumentalizing our projects for

grand utilitarian purposes doesn't recognize preserve their distinctive value.[698]

But Williams has far more than utilitarian ethics in his sights. The alienating character of

utilitarianism, it turns out, is not peculiar to utilitarianism, but rather it is rooted in the impartial

standpoint invested with absolute, deliberative priority. The result is a troubling tendency for

morality to relentlessly crush those things that an agent cares about. Kantian theory is no more

immune to this charge than the heirs of Bentham and Mill. In his words,

> For impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win; and that
> cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point at which it
> is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the
> world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being
> around in that world at all.[699]

Morality so long as it is impartially understood and invested with deliberative authority threatens a

good human life. Williams tells us that the morality propagated by moral theory represents "a

genuine pathology of the moral life" and for that reason "the limitation of the moral is itself

something morally important."[700] The way out of this troubling scenario, Williams concludes, is to

limit the demands morality can make on an agent, i.e., to undercut the absolute authority of morality

itself.

Williams thus turns the tables on moral theory. If the standard way of thinking about

morality had difficulty fitting in personal projects, Williams eliminates the problem by making an

agent's concerns primary: "We must reject any model of personal practical thought according to

which all my projects, purposes, and needs should be made, discursively and at once, considerations

---

[697] See David O. Brink, "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (August 1986), 417-438.

[698] This was the main idea behind Williams's defense of ethical "transparency." See § 6.2.3 of this dissertation.

[699] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), 14, quoted in Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," 299.

[700] Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge UP, 1981), 38.

*for* me. I must deliberate *from* what I am."[701] In other words, Williams revises our starting point for ethical reflection in order to make room for the individual attachments, relationships, projects, and concerns that were muted by impersonal moral theories. His radicalization of the Socratic question in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is meant to counter precisely the pernicious effects of moral theory that erase and the individual agent's distinctive. In other words, we can read the thrust of Williams's work as an attempted recovery of goods suppressed by the standard Kantian and utilitarian construals of morality.

By raising the "all things considered" question, Williams makes it possible to question the place of morality within practical deliberation. As Thomas Nagel reads the thrust of Williams's argument, the ultimate issue is how *morality* relates to *the good life*. Nagel advances a schema for mapping the basic options we have for relating morality and the good life in the context of practical deliberation. As he sees it, we face five basic options. We can reduce morality to the good life or vice versa (options 1 and 2), options which eliminate genuine conflict. Here either morality would constitute the good life or pursuit of the good life would constitute morality. Either way, there would be no remainder. However, if we admit that morality and the good life are indeed distinct and can conflict, then we can assign priority in one of three ways. We can say that the good life consistently wins out (option 3), morality consistently wins out (option 4), or we can deny that either option automatically has priority over the other (option 5). Williams falls within final category.[702]

Williams's particular way of challenging morality in defense of the good life strikes some critics as problematic. If the focus is on protecting personal projects, concerns, and attachments, we need to remember that not everyone cares about, is attached to, or is engaged in good things. As John Cottingham has remarked, "unless we want to go all the way down the Nietzschean road, there are surely some limits to how far the potential artistic genius can be justified in putting his own self-

---

[701] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 200.
[702] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 195-200.

development above the needs of others."[703] Owen Flanagan gives voice to a similar concern well in writing: "surely every reflective person wants to live within a form of life which will not allow the Hitlers and Mansons of the world their meaningful projects. It is not merely that we do not want to live in a world which allows them to carry out their projects. We do not want them to *have* these projects themselves."[704] Some projects are cruel. Some projects are evil. There is thus a legitimate worry about the limits to the pursuit of personal projects. As Susan Wolf summarizes the general anti-Williams criticism as follows: "one man's ground projects are still *one* man's, and his interests, however fundamental, must be balanced against the interests and rights of others with which their pursuit would interfere."[705] So just as we might have reason that morality doesn't always win, we certainly have reason that it isn't always ignored or overridden. While we have reason to be dissatisfied with an overly moralistic starting-point, we have grounds to wonder whether Williams has gone too far in the opposite direction. We might wonder if Lawrence Blum is right when he (admittedly with exaggeration) describes Williams' work as "a sophisticated defense of high-minded selfishness."[706]

## 5.2 Wolf Reads Williams

Susan Wolf offers an interpretation of Williams that captures his driving concern while avoiding the criticisms voiced above. This enables us to overcome certain stumbling blocks to recognizing the force of his arguments. The centerpiece of Wolf's strategy for modifying, defending,

---

[703] John Cottingham, "Impartiality and Ethical Formation," in *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World*, ed. Brian Feltham and John Cottingham (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 72.
[704] Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991) 82-3.
[705] Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 55-56. Wolf describes a similar objection to Williams elsewhere: "the idea that someone should be allowed to ignore or even worsen the situations of others whose opportunities for minimally decent lives are all but nonexistent, in order to get whatever it takes to fill her life with meaning seems to amount to an outright denial of the reasonableness of the moral point of view." Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 301. For a summary of other responses to Williams see p. 300-302.
[706] Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 26. The whole quote: "the writings of Williams with which we are concerned can leave the impression that one has been presented with a sophisticated defense of high-minded selfishness. Although this would not be a just interpretation, these writings fail to provide a coherent conception of morality which remains once the Kantian one is abandoned."

and ultimately expanding on Williams's work is the introduction of the notion of *meaning* into the discussion. On her reading, the worry that impartial morality can require the unacceptable sacrifice of activities, relationships, and other "projects" is best conceived in terms of the potential conflict between *meaning* and *morality*. Given the undeniable importance of meaning to an undamaged, flourishing human life, meaning itself limits the extent to which morality may require of us, and thus morality cannot be granted absolute authority in the living of our lives.[707]

Adding 'meaning' to our conceptual repertoire has broader ramifications for our conception of moral psychology. Specifically, it impacts our understanding of human motivation and reasons for action. Wolf claims that the addition of the motivational category of 'meaning' undermines the crude motivational dichotomy inherited from the Kantian tradition—namely, duty versus self-interest. These two categories fail to exhaust human motives. The 'meaningful' gives voice to important values that are otherwise ignored, suppressed by the dominant models of morality.[708] We go to great, often sacrificial, lengths to carry out certain intellectual or artistic projects or do things to help family and friends. Wolf's examples are working late at night on crafting a philosophical essay or making a Halloween costume for her child.[709] On her analysis, these undertakings cannot be counted as done for moral reasons because no sense of duty or moral worth factors into our decision-making, but neither are these actions done for the sake of self-interest or happiness. In fact, such actions may at times be frustrating, annoying, and detract from one's happiness. What these examples point to, she maintains, is a range of values that are neither moral nor self-interested. One significant effect of her proposal is to thus redraw the lines of our evaluative geography and thereby open up a middle space of meaning between self-interest and morality.

---

[707] See Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 299-315; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 53-62; Susan Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," in Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, eds., *Luck, Value, & Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71-92. These more recent writings develop themes found in her classic article Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (August 1982): 419-439.

[708] See Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters,* 1-7; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-225.

[709] She writes, "When I visit my brother in the hospital, or help a friend move, or stay up all night sewing my daughter a Halloween costume, I act neither for egoistic reasons nor for moral ones." Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 4-5, quote on p. 4.

Those activities and relationships that give our lives meaning exhibit, on Wolf's analysis, a dynamic relationship between subjective and objective elements. On the one hand, meaning-imbuing pursuits, relationships, and concerns are bound up with feelings of satisfaction for person, who is doing something that she finds important. While feelings inevitably fluctuate, the overall bent of doing meaningful things is toward satisfaction, although this does not mean there is any one particular feeling.[710] On the other hand, the meaningful is something that has an objective dimension.[711] Some activities strike us as less meaningful than others, even if, they fully absorb and satisfy the person engaged in them. Spending one's life doing something like collecting garden gnomes fails to be objectively worthwhile, she thinks, even if it fully satisfies the collector. Here Wolf helps herself to the category of 'objectivity' to distinguish between the mere subjectively satisfying and the properly meaningful. While talk of "objective" meaning may seem to invoke "queer" metaphysical entities of the kind that disturbed Mackie, Wolf defends a more deflationary reading. On her view, the "objective" dimension of the 'meaningful' merely expresses the idea that we can be mistaken in our ascriptions of meaningfulness.[712] She links this to "a need, or at least an interest or concern, to see oneself life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one's own."[713] This, she speculates, springs from our social nature, "our need or wish not to be alone."[714] These reflections lead Wolf to the conviction that "meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it."[715]

---

[710] See Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 13-18, 25-33, 109-115 She notes, "Though it is central to my view that there is a subjective dimension to meaningfulness, there is no reason to believe or expect that there is a single subjective quality of experience that all meaningful lives possess…there is a range of such attitudes and conditions, which includes love and fulfillment, and which reflects the kind of intentional, but also qualitatively positive, attachment to an object or activity that an agent must have in order for engagement with it to contribute to the meaningfuless of his life." Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 111-114.

[711] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters,* 25-33, 119-131.

[712] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters,* 44-45. For his famous critique of moral realism see J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 38-42.

[713] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters,* 27.

[714] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters,* 28.

[715] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 26.

Unfortunately, Wolf never moves beyond evoking intuitions that some activities are a waste of time, and consequently, her conception of objectivity remains a fledgling enterprise.[716]

Despite her anemic theory of value, Wolf's conceptual redistricting has the upshot of giving her the resources with which to criticize both the nature of self-interestedness as well as the primacy of the moral. On the one hand, given what matters to our lives, what makes our lives meaningful involves undertaking a wide range of projects with a value beyond ourselves, say, a contribution to culture, the well-being of a friend, or participating in a cause that makes the world a better place, it becomes less clear what self-interest really means.[717] As Wolf puts it, "Once one has accepted a conception of self-interest that recognizes meaningfulness as an independent aspect of one's personal good, one may have to admit that in such cases there may be no answer to the question of what is most in one's self-interest."[718] The ultimate implication is that self-interest is not only "more indeterminate and difficult to apply" but also "less significant from a practical perspective."[719]

On the other hand, the recognition of the meaningful forces us to change the way we think about morality and its authority in our lives. Wolf claims the concept of the 'meaningful' highlights how non-moral interests can reasonably take precedence over the moral, thus accomplishing what Williams tries to do with talk of "projects" and "categorical desires."[720] The basic idea is that certain relationships or activities can be so central to a person's existence, so bound up with his or her sense of purpose in life, that impartial morality has no reasonable ground on which to require her surrender of that good. Echoing Williams she writes, "it is hard to see how reasons for staying within the moral

---

[716] In fact, Wolf tells us explicitly "I shall not be offering a theory of objective value, much less a foolproof procedure for determining which things have it." Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 33. Some of Wolf's critics of argued that she need not bring into play the notion of objectivity to accomplish her philosophical goals. See the comments by Nomy Arpaly and Johnathan Haidt in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*.
[717] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 51-53.
[718] See Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," especially 223-225, quote from p. 224.
[719] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 52.
[720] Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality." Williams describes "categorical desires" as follows: "Some desires are admittedly contingent on the prospect of one's being alive, but not all desires can be in that sense conditional, since it is possible to imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil, and if he decides to go on in life, then he is propelled forward into it by some desire (however general or inchoate) which cannot operate conditionally on his being alive, since it settles the question of whether he is going to be alive" (11). For Wolf's explicit engagement with Williams's ideas see Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," especially 306-315 and Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment."

order could override one's reasons for doing something without which one would lose interest in the world, and so presumably in the moral order of the world, altogether."[721] Or as she puts it elsewhere,

> If we agree with Williams that a person whose life is meaningless might lack any reason to live or to take an interest in the world, and agree also that morality itself, or the opportunity to engage in it, may not be sufficient to give meaning to life; then it seems to me that we are committed to agreeing also that morality is not unconditionally overriding. We cannot rationally expect a person to abandon all that gives her life meaning in order to, as it were, preserve the moral order—for were she to abandon what gives her a reason to live and to care about the world, she would give up as well her reason to care about the moral order.[722]

The real upshot of Williams's critique, on Wolf's reading, is that there can be no sensible absolute commitment to morality: "If one recognizes the legitimacy of categorical desires for anything other than morality, however, which ground one's interest in living and one's interest in the world, that would be one unconditional commitment too many."[723]

In holding that morality oversteps its proper bounds in requiring certain sacrifices of moral agents, i.e., those things that give an agent's life 'meaning,' Wolf develops and extends a position initially formulated by Williams. But her articulation of these arguments in terms of the notion of 'meaningfulness' and with it the implied notion of 'objectivity' (on her analysis, at least) deviates from his in a substantial way. The major upshot of this conceptual addition, Wolf thinks, is that it gives her the resources to respond to the charge that Williams's critique is "morally subversive or terribly depressing,"[724] sentiments expressed by Flanagan and Blum in their comments quoted above. Those sympathetic to the idea that non-moral interests (e.g., projects, relationships) can sometimes rightfully override moral duty need a way to define the limits of when it is permissible to act contrary to impartial morality. 'Meaning' functions as Wolf's bulwark against cruel, sadistic, and otherwise terrifying projects. She writes,

> since meaning has an objective (that is, nonsubjective) component, we do not have to take every individual's claim to face a conflict between meaning and morality at face value. An individual cannot get meaning from worthless projects, much less from projects of wholly

---

[721] Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 57. This passage re-articulates a point found in Williams, "Persons, character, and morality," 14.

[722] Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," 312.

[723] Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," 92.

[724] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 58; also see Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," 306-307.

negative value. Thus a child-molester cannot get meaning from molesting children, whatever he may think or feel about the matter.[725]

The notion of 'meaning,' specifically its objective dimension, thus enables her to reconcile two competing goals: (a) she can articulate how morality can be reasonably overridden by personal commitments without (b) opening the flood-gates to cruel, misanthropic projects.

What does this have to do with *moral theory*? As Brian Leiter points out, it is crucial that the criticisms advanced by both Wolf and Williams assume the conception of morality as advanced by moral theories—*not* merely common-sense morality. Consequently, the distinction between "morality critics" and "theory critics" breaks down at some level because the 'morality' criticized by the former is a distinctively theorized version of morality.[726] Kantian and utilitarian frameworks are, on Wolf's view, "competing interpretations of the moral point of view."[727] It is this heavily theorized, moral point of view that causes the problems and threatens to displace personal projects and attachments responsible for imbuing life with meaning. Thus, their critiques of morality *are* themselves critiques of moral theory. Morality à la Kantianism or utilitarianism poses conflicts with our loves, attachments, projects, and sources of personal aspiration more starkly than does everyday morality because its principles are more demanding. Peter Singer's classic essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" is perhaps the most famous example of how theorized morality makes it more demanding than the morality of common sense and thereby raises tensions between morality and non-moral

---

[725] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, 60; also see Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," 306-307.

[726] See Brain Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics" *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (January, 1997): 252-262. He writes, "Admittedly, the Morality Critics often present themselves as critics of morality itself—in that sense they echo Nietzsche—but, on examination, it is clear that their targets are specific theories of morality, consequentialist and deontological" (255). He adds, "Like other Morality Critics, Williams writes as though he is attacking 'morality,' when what he is really attacking is 'morality' as conceived, systematized, and refined by philosophers. Such a critique may be a worthy endeavor, but it is far from worrying about the 'dangers' of ordinary morality as understood—unsystematically and inchoately—by ordinary people" (257). According to Leiter the main difference between what he calls the "Morality Critics" and the "Theory Critics" lies in their point of emphasis: "The Theory Critic invokes the plurality of values to emphasize the inadequacy of a theoretical framework which excludes so much, while the Morality critic invokes the plurality of values in order to emphaize the costs of morality's OT [Overriding Thesis] and to argue against it" (261).

[727] See Susan Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 204-205; Wolf makes the same point in her classic article "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (August 1982) 436-437.

considerations.[728] This is one reason why critiques of moral theory and critique of morality are hard to prize apart.[729]

Beyond this observation, however, we can see an internal connection between morality's authority and its content. Philippa Foot once observed that morality, unlike etiquette, does not allow permissible breaches of conduct. This is, on her view, a function of how it is taught. We allow for rules of etiquette to be overridden without the rules of etiquette ceasing to be rules of etiquette. By contrast, if one is allowed to break a moral rule, e.g., 'thou shall not lie,' for some good reason, say, to save an innocent friend's life, then, it isn't a breach of morality because morality, it conveniently turns out, never really required that. Thus rules of etiquette can be reasonably broken, but if a rule of morality is reasonably broken, then it isn't actually a moral obligation.[730] Foot's observation points to the way in which the content and authority of morality are bound up with one another. We preserve the primacy of morality by modifying the content to what it really requires.

Wolf is well aware of these interconnections between a critique of morality's authority and a critique of moral theory's content. The basic problem, on her view, is that a moral theory cannot have both "fully determinable" content while also being "always profoundly important," i.e., a basic tension between detailing moral content and holding fast to moral authority.[731] The reason is "the further one goes in specifying one's conception of morality in such a way as to assure that one's questions about what is morally permissible have determinate answers, the more difficult it becomes to defend the view that morality has supreme authority."[732] A corollary of this point can be found in

---

[728] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972): 229-243. Also see Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 190.

[729] Cf. Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), chapter 2 for a discussion of different ways one can tease apart morality and moral theory in relation to moral requirements that conflict with personal goods.

[730] See Philippa Foot, "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 181-188.

[731] Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," 82; cf. Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 216-217.

[732] Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," 82. She adds, "the tension arises as long as questions of moral permissibility are understood to have determinate *content*, different from whatever it is, all things considered, most rational to do. For example, if we identify moral permissibility with 'what can be justified from an impartial point of view', it is open to question why meeting that condition should have supreme authority for the agent, even if we recognize that there may be a range of situations in

Owen Flanagan's claim that the less consensus we have on the content of morality, the less a defense

of morality's priority matters: "if there is widespread disagreement, of both an intertheoretical and an

intratheoretical sort, about the nature of the moral domain and about the nature and order of goods

and obligations, then there is good reason to think that the overridingness thesis, the belief in the

sovereignty of the moral good, is itself a less contentful, interesting, and weighty thesis than we have

been led to believe."[733]

Given the tight connection between the content of morality and its status, what do we do

with Wolf's critique? Does it give us reasons to reject moral theory or simply to downgrade the

significance of morality? I read Wolf as a eudaimonistic thinker, whose work is concerned to bring

into focus the variety of goods that are important to a flourishing human life. Her challenge to an

imperious, impartial morality whose domineering rule leaves no place for pursuit of the individual

good is a call to a fuller, more complete recognition of the range of goods that are important to a

good human life, but her primary emphasis falls on questioning the authority of morality.[734] Wolf's

position invites us to re-inhabit the "all things considered" deliberative perspective, something like

"Socrates' Question" in all but name. She writes, "Once we recognize that our reasons come from a

variety of sources that no single point of view can capture, however, we seem forced to admit that we

often can and do deliberate among reasons without the help of any overarching point of view at

all."[735] From this general, deliberative standpoint we must balance, weigh, and choose between

competing goods:

> When I deliberate, then, about what to do, I simply deliberate, as it were, *from here*. I consider
> a variety of values that have no common measure, taking into account, at least sometimes,
> when the occasion warrants, both how attached I am to the values and goals in question and
> how important or worthwhile these goals and values seem to be independently of my

which the question of how to apply that condition has no determinate answer.'" (82n15); Or elsewhere, "if
morality is to be general enough and substantive enough to have the capacity to guide action, I believe the
problem will arise no mater how broad the range of values we allow to constitute its basis. If, on the other
hand, we define moral permissibility in such a way as to guarantee the permissibility of actions that a good
(appealing) lover will perform, then we avoid this problem, but at the cost of introducing others" (89).

[733] Owen Flanagan, "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (January
1986) 53-60, quotation from p. 58.

[734] Hence Wolf's categorization as part of the "morality critics." See Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality
Critics."

[735] Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 219; cf. Wolf, "Moral Saints," 435-439.

attachments to them. I juggle, I balance, I chose—and I assume that with respect to this general characterization of decision-making, I am not unusual.[736]

Yet this point leads Wolf to the conclusion that a distinctive "moral point of view" doesn't elucidate our moral situation and should therefore be jettisoned.[737] This distinction between moral and non-moral points of view ceases to be helpful once we (a) see significant features of life as not falling into these categories and (b) admit that the moral point of view doesn't always win out in rational deliberation. Indeed, as Wolf notes, the moral point of view itself may be internally divided, as is evidenced by the competing goods stressed by rival Kantian and utilitarian theories.[738] The take away from Wolf's critique thus seems to be the emergence of a markedly pluralistic conception of deliberation, which seeks to do justice to a wide range of goods without installing one value in a seat of absolute authority. This picture of deliberation springing from a respect for the significance of the 'meaningful' in human life "presents difficulties for the enterprise of building a systematic theory or providing a unified structure in which all our legitimate reasons for action will fit."[739] We have already covered the reason: articulating a systematic moral theory with both detailed content and an unwavering commitment to the authority of the moral cannot be done, on her view. We either give up a view of morality with satisfying content or we fudge on the authority of morality. We can't have it both ways. Nevertheless, this does not, on her view, amount to "a rejection of theory" but rather "a liberation of theory," one that will enable us to "look further and more imaginatively at the possible structures moral thinking can take."[740] At this point, however, 'theory' hardly looks like the objectionable notion criticized by anti-theorists.[741] Otherwise put, we end up with a picture of deliberation with no highest-order set of governing values, where any such values can put into question from an "all things considered" point of view. We thus find, even in her most recent

---

[736] Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 219.
[737] Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 218-223.
[738] Wolf, "Morality and the View from Here," 222.
[739] Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," 315.
[740] Wolf, "Morality and the View From Here," 223.
[741] See chapter six of this dissertation for a discussion of the anti-theorist conception of 'theory.'

writings, the "healthy form of intuitionism," which she defended in her breakthrough essay "Moral Saints."[742]

Wolf's account has many virtues: it crystallizes the most salient features of Williams's critique of morality; it limits the fall-out of rejecting the absolute authority of morality, i.e., the limitations built into the objective dimension of 'meaning'; and it re-orients us towards a more comprehensive starting point for ethical reflection. But her account also has its vices: despite eudaimonstic gestures, Wolf hardly gives us a positive model of moral thinking after the eclipse of the moral point of view; the 'objectivity' of the meaningful, which plays the important role of placing limits on those considerations that can override the moral, remains woefully underdeveloped; and her emphasis on subverting morality's status may seem to dangerously place the onus of criticism on the wrong target—namely, morality itself rather than on bad theories of it.

Our above discussion of Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf us gave reasons why pursuit of the good life might sometimes generate reasons sufficient to outweigh moral considerations, i.e., reasons to be sympathetic to the idea that "the right" need not always triumph over "the good," to use Taylor's terms. In this way, we can read Williams and Wolf as Taylor's allies in challenging one of the received dogmas of modern moral theory—namely, that 'morality' as it is construed by contemporary moral theory ought to outweigh any other competing considerations in our practical deliberations. Williams and Wolf thus point the way back to a more pluralistic, more eudaimonistic conception of practical deliberation than is commonly found in mainstream Anglo-American moral philosophy. Their critiques pose afresh the "all things considered" question of how to live, but Taylor's articulation remains superior to the treatments found in Williams and Wolf. In what follows I will argue for Taylor's position in light of this broader philosophical context.

---

[742] As she put it in her classic article, "both in our philosophizing and in our lives, we must be willing to raise normative questions from a perspective that is unattached to a commitment to any particular well-ordered system of values. It must be admitted that, in doing so, we run the risk of finding normative answers that diverge from the answers given by whatever moral theory one accepts…In the background of this paper, then, there lurks a commitment to what seems to me to be a healthy form of intuitionism. It is a form of intuitionism which is not intended to take the place of more rigorous, systematically developed, moral theories—rather, it is intended to put these more rigorous and systematic moral theories in their place." Wolf, "Moral Saints," 439.

## 5.3 Charles Taylor on Ethical Pluralism and Hypergoods

Taylor's critique of procedural moral theory intersects with the work of Wolf and Williams in his concern for a broader perspective on the ethical life and a fuller appreciation of the range of goods necessary to human flourishing. Modern moral philosophy is, he thinks, far too "narrow" in its construal of the subject matter, far too content to focus on questions of moral obligation in exclusion of the questions of the good life.[743] Unlike Wolf and Williams, his sometime collaborators, he locates the ultimate source of the error not in the overreach of morality's authority but in the theory's overdetermination of the moral. On Taylor's diagnosis, the problematic picture of 'morality' springs from the combination of two theses: (1) the claim that moral considerations override all other competing goods, values, and interests (*the priority thesis*) and (2) the claim that an ultimate criterion or decision-procedure ought to determine what counts as a 'moral' consideration (*the procedural thesis*).[744] In his words, we can see "a common tendency in modern philosophy to define morality by a kind of segregation, though the definition of the boundary has varied."[745] The principles of utility and universalization have historically functioned as this kind of segregating bright-line between moral and non-moral values, between overriding and override-able values. Together these two theses invest moral theory, the generator of decision-procedures, with the final authority to determine what an agent ought to do. Taylor worries that morality, so conceived, can dominate our practical deliberations and force out the full range of goods that matter to a flourishing human life.[746]

The end effect of Taylor's criticism thus bears much in common with the general critical direction found in Williams and Wolf. All three thinkers are concerned to rescue ethical reflection from the tight grip of moral considerations.  They all attempt to re-orient ethical thinking around broader, eudaimonistic considerations. Nevertheless, Taylor differs from his fellow critics on a crucial

---

[743] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-4; Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 3-4.

[744] The best, synoptic statement of his position can be found in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87-89.

[745] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

[746] He wonders "whether morality doesn't exact a high price from us in terms of wholeness." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 499. Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 182. There he writes: "If obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether."

point. Unlike Williams and Wolf, who focus their attack on the priority thesis, Taylor's bugbear is the

procedural thesis. This difference in emphasis is not without consequence. As I hope to demonstrate,

Taylor's formulation of modern moral philosophy's root mistake enables him to appropriate many of

the insights in Wolf and Williams without the problems that haunt their work. His notion of

"hypergoods"[747] enables him to re-frame moral deliberation in a way that does justice to a wider

range of goods than modern moral theories while at the same time recognizing the importance of the

goods those theories defend.[748] What emerges from Taylor's account is thus a more attractive

eudaimonistic vision than we find in either his fellow critics or modern moral theories.

Taylor's critique of moral inarticulacy takes issue with the assumption that there is a unified

domain called the 'moral' that can be demarcated by an ultimate criterion. Both Kantianism and

utilitarianism, the dominant strands of modern moral thinking, are guilty of promoting "the belief

that there is a single consistent domain of the 'moral,' that there is one set of considerations, or mode

of calculation, which determines what we ought 'morally' to do."[749] Modern moral theories assume a

unified, delimitable zone of the 'moral,' i.e., a criterion for morally 'right' action. From here they

proceed: "(1) to try to work out exactly what the considerations are which tell us which action is right

and (2) to try to show that these are the right considerations, against other rival candidates."[750] The

question for modern moral theorists is which decision procedure carves out the special realm of the

'moral.' Is the best procedure one that maximizes welfare (or some variant) or is it the most

consistent set of rules? The underlying assumption that we can identify a property characteristic of

'right' actions, however, simply goes unquestioned. Taylor's critique starts by calling into question the

deeper premise—namely, the "homogenization of the 'moral' we find in both utilitarianism and

---

[747] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

[748] As Nicholas Smith describes his position, "If we think of morality as a hypergood, Taylor suggests we can make sense of the idea that the demands of right trump other strong values or goods people identify with, without divorcing the moral point of view from an orientation to the good as such." Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002), 112.

[749] Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 233.

[750] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 4.

formalism.”[751] This follows, as we saw in chapter four, from an underlying procedural conception of practical rationality.

Taylor sees the problems highlighted by Williams and Wolf, i.e., the way goods of personal fulfillment and meaning get bulldozed over by morality, as stemming from the homogenizing tendencies inherent in modern moral theories. It is moral theory's assumption of a domain called 'the moral' that "confuses us into thinking that there is only once set of goals or standards which can be accorded human significance."[752] The utilitarian way of conceiving of the moral domain, for instance, "does not seem to have place for the goals of personal fulfillment or for our aspirations to realize in our lives other goods than benevolence: to be people of integrity, sensitivity, feeling, and love (except insofar as this instrumentally serves benevolence)."[753] Here we see Taylor alluding to Williams's charge that utilitarianism does not and cannot respect personal integrity. The utility calculus pays no attention to personal convictions.[754] Moreover, Neo-Kantian theories are similarly one-dimensional: "We get a tight circumscription of the domain of morality, with a very clear criterion for right and wrong, but that is partly because we expel from the precincts of morality a number of aspirations that are now classed as merely personal, and hence not obligatory in the same sense."[755] Wolf and Williams enter as co-conspirators at this stage.[756] Seen from the perspective of Taylor's work, their arguments show how costly a homogenized, *procedural* conception of morality is.[757] Their arguments lead us to question whether we are prepared to check our meaningful attachments, projects, and integrity at the door. If not, we have reason to suspect that morality, so construed, is too narrow. Otherwise put, in Taylor we get an alternative diagnosis of the deeper source of the problems

---

[751] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 234.

[752] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 236.

[753] Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 171.

[754] Cf. Williams's remark that utilitarianism "underestimates the significance of ideals or ethical conceptions and requires an agent to abandon any stand of principle or deeply held conviction if a large enough aggregate of preferences, of whatever kind, favors a contrary action." Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 86.

[755] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 172.

[756] In his narrative concerning the need to return to a "broad" view of "ethics" as opposed to a "narrow" view of "morality," Taylor mentions Williams as part of "a countermovement" against the "narrow" conception of moral philosophy he is targeting. See Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 3-4.

[757] I have benefited from a discussion with David MacPherson on this point.

discussed in Wolf and Williams—namely, the unspoken assumption that 'morality' ought to be conceived as a unified, homogenous whole. If we jettison this assumption, we may be able to avoid, minimize, or at least give voice to the painful conflicts between meaningfulness and morality discussed above.

The assumption that morality is homogenous is optional. In contrast to such moral theories that attempt to come up with the right decision-procedure for marking off morality, a set of considerations that are expected to trump all others, Taylor offers an alternative picture that emphasizes the "plurality of goods" that matter to moral agents.[758] Call this the *plurality of goods model*. This is closely connected with his broader focus on the good life. When we revive an ancient ethical framework and begin to talk about the good life again, we are in a position to acknowledge and deal with a variety of goods and a variety of ethical concepts in a non-reductionistic manner.[759] Once we drop the idea that morally right action can be understood without placing it within a broader conception of the good life, we undercut the grounds on which modern moral philosophy's "drive towards unification"[760] rests. When we ask questions about the good life, erecting a wall between the moral and non-moral ceases to be a pressing concern and along with it the tendency to identify morality with one kind of distinctive consideration. Nevertheless, within this new framework those goods highlighted by utilitarians and Kantians still carry significant weight, but in this setting we are forced to think about their value differently. As Taylor remarks "morality…can be seen as a legitimate part of the larger domain of ethics. What it cannot be anymore for the users of this vocabulary is the whole, or the one ultimately serious domain of the practical, trumping all others."[761]

---

[758] This phrase occurs in a number of places in Taylor's work, but see Charles Taylor, "Plurality of Goods," in *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 113-119. Also see Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods" for the most detailed account of this point in Taylor's work.

[759] This is another way of putting the connection between what I called in chapter one the *unification thesis* and the *independence thesis*.

[760] Charles Taylor, "A most peculiar institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 149.

[761] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 4.

We can represent Taylor's alternative construal as resting on two theses: (1) it opens us to a wider range of ethical values than moral theory standardly admits (*the thesis of ethical pluralism*) and (2) it forces us to re-conceive the priority of morality in relation to other values (*the thesis of "hypergoods"*).

Let's begin with what I'm calling Taylor's thesis of ethical pluralism. A longstanding theme in Taylor's ethical writings is his defense of ethical pluralism, the thesis that there are many different ethical values that cannot be reduced to a single source. On this point, Taylor joins a wide range of writers from the intuitionists to Williams James to contemporary writers including Stuart Hampshire, Thomas Nagel, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Owen Flanagan, and Elizabeth Anderson.[762] Despite different motivations and reasons for advancing pluralism, these various thinkers converge on the conclusion that attempts to reduce morality to a single dimension or ultimately one basic principle are bound to fail. Taylor distinguishes between two levels of pluralism: (a) the idea that there are different ethical views in different cultures and time periods and (b) the idea that there are incommensurable goods at play in an individual's practical deliberation.[763] I will call these respectively *dialogical pluralism* and *deliberative pluralism*. In chapter four we saw how Taylor's meta-ethic defends ethical pluralism by opening a broad space for moral dialogue between many different ethical viewpoints. In this discussion, however, I will confine my remarks primarily to pluralism within ethics, i.e., the idea that various values tug on a deliberating agent's heart. Taylor is an ethical pluralist in both of the aforementioned senses. But his critique of modern moral philosophy also takes him beyond the mere claim that we have multiple irreducible kinds of ethical values. After all, the heterogeneity of value is compatible with the idea that one sub-set of those values has a dominant

---

[762] William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), 141-162; J.O. Urmson, "A Defense of Intuitionism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 75 (1974-1975): 111-119; Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983); Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," *Moral Questions* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1979), 128-141; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008); Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, prologue and chapter 1; Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), chapter 1; Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 1-19.

[763] Taylor, Leading a Life," 170.

status and overrides the other ethical values.[764] Taylor, however, joins Williams and Wolf in rejecting the thesis that moral considerations always override other competing considerations. The account emerging from Taylor's writings promotes a pluralistic conception of value as well as denies any guaranteed primacy to a special class among the many ethical values.

Taylor employs the contrast images of a rising *slope* and a steep *cliff* to express the difference between two competing temperaments in moral philosophy: "In some cases the frontier is very sharp, like a cliff, separating high-altitude matters of real moral moment from a low-lying plain of ordinary desires. In other cases, we have something more like a gentle slope interrupted by many plateaux, representing a finely graded hierarchy of goals, none of which stands our starkly from all the rest."[765] Proceduralist moral theories embrace the cliff image conception of morality's relation to other values. In contrast, Taylor's plurality of goods model more closely resembles the slope image.

What other ethical values are we talking about? As already mentioned in our discussion of Williams and Wolf, meaningful attachments and projects count as one instance of non-moral, ethical values. But there are far more than these values. Taylor points to the variety of ethical concepts we have like integrity, Christian love or *agape*, liberation, and the value of detached calculating rationality as examples of the heterogeneity of human ethical values and ideas.[766] To these we can add those values associated with utilitarianism and Kantianism—namely, promoting the welfare of feeling animals and respecting the dignity of rational agents. Thomas Nagel gives us yet another list of heterogeneous values. He notes five: (1) specific obligations, (2) general rights, (3) utility, (4) perfectionist values, and (5) personal projects.[767] Moreover, a look at some of our thick ethical

---

[764] This is how I read Thomas Nagel's position. See Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, chapter 10 and Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value."

[765] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 173.

[766] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 234-5. Cf. Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, § 5.2. She draws the connection between having a thick ethical vocabulary and having the possibility of expressing different ways in which we can value aspects of our worlds.

[767] Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," 129-130.

language reveals an even more extensive range of our ethical-evaluative notions (and their many subtle variations).[768]

How is it that Taylor sees procedural moral theory at odds with a plurality of values? Recall that, on his view, modern moral theories embrace both (1) *the priority thesis,* the claim that moral obligations override other conflicting considerations, and (2) *the procedural thesis*, the claim that procedural methods in reasoning (e.g., universalization or maximization tests) determine the content of moral obligations. More specifically, thesis (2) filters thesis (1), i.e., values are given priority insofar as they are picked out by a given theory's procedure. This way of assigning overriding status is problematic because it makes no reference to the notion of importance. The principle of utility or universalization prevails by definition rather than by virtue of its significance. This is the fundamental problem with procedural 'morality,' on Taylor's view:

> This conception of the moral is strangely skewed. It tries to account for the incomparable weight of certain considerations, which we should see in terms of the incomparable status of certain goods, by segregating off a domain of the 'moral', which is then hermetically sealed off from other considerations… *'Moral' defines a certain kind of reasoning, which in some unexplained way has in principle priority. It is not clear how moral considerations can function with others in a single deliberative activity; we cannot see why these higher considerations should usually be given priority, but also why they might be denied this in certain circumstances.* For this kind of deliberation would presuppose that we see them all as goods, with different *levels of importance.*[769]

He adds

> What makes this kind of rule [generated by a proceduralist moral theory] unlivable in practice is what I want to call *differences of weight*. Within any domain, there will be issues of vastly different importance. The domain as a whole may be of great importance, in the sense that you may judge that it is here that the value of your life is really decided. But within that domain, there will be matters that are central, and others that are more peripheral, questions where what makes this domain important are centrally at stake and others where something relatively minor is in play.[770]

It is at this point that we re-encounter the Williams-Wolf style dilemmas described above. In virtue of defining morality in procedural terms and investing that category with overriding power, other

---

[768] Consider briefly the range of our thick language: abrasive, fatuous, pander, flaunt, goody-goody, hokey, melodramatic, parochial, decadent, mercy, pity, insecure, binge, crank, conceited, saucy, coddle, clueless, cheeky, chauvinistic, casuist, captious, cantankerous, bawdy, awkward, pinchpenny, obsequious, impostor, swindler, scoundrel, naïve, sophisticated, manipulative, gallant, fussy, whimsical, fancy, debauchery, vain, shifty, sensationalistic, ruthless, loaf, amateur, fickle, and the list could go on.

[769] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87, italics mine.

[770] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 176, italics mine.

goods fall victim to an irrationally imperious morality. Decision procedures fail to track judgments of importance, and hence cannot be reasonably trusted with overriding status: "You can't just say, this set of considerations always has priority, as Kant does with his categorical imperative, because this would be to exclude all questions of importance and put the most trivial demands of justice-benevolence over the most weighty of fulfillment."[771] Taylor gives us the following example: "I don't just throw away my career as a concert pianist to raise an extra few dollars for Oxfam."[772] The take away lesson, he thinks, is "systematic priority leads to pragmatic absurdity."[773] For this reason Taylor holds that proceduralist constraints on practical reasoning are chronically unstable, the notion of importance inevitably re-appears, and the narrow construal of 'morality' is ultimately doomed to failure. He writes,

> This kind of homogenizing of a whole issue area by promoting the trivial to the rank of the vital can work up to a point for a while, but sooner or later life reasserts itself, and people begin to make distinctions. That is because the sense that there is an obligation or call on us comes from our sense that something important here is at stake and in the end has to be sensitive to this perception of importance.[774]

Moral thinking, in other words, cannot avoid judgments of ultimate importance, i.e., judgments of the good.[775] This is a necessary feature practical thinking. But this is precisely what procedural moral theories neglect.

In contrast to the proceduralist model, Taylor argues that ethical reflection must bring into play judgments of importance. This enables us not only to integrate goods like charity, justice, fairness, freedom from bodily pain with other values like integrity, romantic love, and personal satisfaction in a common deliberative framework, but it also allows us to make sense of the gravity we often accord to issues of fairness or utility. Taylor wants to hold on to the priority of 'moral' values like fairness, respecting the autonomy of others, and minimizing pain but in such a way that is

---

[771] Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 63.
[772] Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 63.
[773] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 176.
[774] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 176.
[775] This is a move, as Taylor himself notes, that parallels one made by Bernard Williams. See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 10.

(a) context sensitive and (b) explains the weightiness of certain deliberative considerations. Judgments of importance capture both of these features. The key point is that the deliberative priority accorded to these goods is due not to procedural stipulation but rather to judgments of their significance, i.e., judgments regarding the good. Taylor introduces the notion of "hypergoods" in order to draw our attention to those "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about."[776] The goods claim a higher status in the practical deliberations of a moral agent. Moral considerations of various kinds have deliberative priority because of their great worth. They have something like overriding status but in virtue of the substantive judgment that they are more important goods. Think about the violent repression of democratic protestors recently perpetrated by certain governments in a desperate attempt to maintain control. We are appalled by their brutality, outraged by their suppression of free speech in order to protect their own dominant political and financial positions. The importance of the goods at stake here go unexpressed if we think about this as an error in procedural reasoning. These regimes have perpetrated great evil because of the importance of the goods they have brutally denied their people.[777] Taylor thus attempts to salvage the priority of moral values by evoking their substantial value, i.e., their significance or importance. Here we see the entanglement of the weak and strong readings of ethical holism.

Judgments of ultimate importance point us back towards a moment of unification in Taylor's view of practical deliberation, which Taylor following MacIntyre locates in the narrative arc of a human life.[778] We must in the course of our lives make choices between a variety of different goods. Taylor's neo-Aristotelian conception of practical deliberation thus contains two moments—one the emphasizes the plurality of goods in a flourishing human life and the other that stresses the unifying pressure exerted by pursuit of the good life:

---

[776] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

[777] Cf. Harry Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," *Autonomes Handeln: Beträge zur Philosophie von Harry G. Frankfurt*, eds. Monika Betzler and Barbara Guckes (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 259-273.

[778] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 2; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chapter 15.

There are in fact two separable stages of reflection, which Aristotle perhaps does not separate here: We can determine what we think the goods are that we seek 'for their own sakes' and also their relative ranking, if any. But even if we see a plurality of final ends of equal rank, we still have to live them; that is, we have to design a life in which they can be somehow integrated, in some proportions, since any life is finite and cannot admit of unlimited pursuit of any good. This sense of a life—or a design or plan, if we want to emphasize our powers of leading here—is necessarily one. If this is our final end, there can only be one.[779]

Despite Taylor's insistence on the plurality of goods in his critique of proceduralism, he ultimately strikes a middle position that also recognizes a tendency toward unification stemming from the need to make choices in living one's life. In his words, "Real ethical life is inescapably led between the one and the many. We cannot do away either with the diversity of goods (or at least so I would argue against modern moral theory) or with the aspiration to oneness implicit in our leading our lives."[780] As Ruth Abbey remarks,

Taylor's distinctive brand of pluralism tries to chart a course between the Scylla of homogenizing reductionism and the Charybdis of radical or irreducible pluralism. He wants to draw attention to the plurality of and conflict among the goods that are denied by much modern moral philosophy. However, he also agues that it is wrong to assume a priori that seemingly divergent goods cannot be reconciled.[781]

We are now in a position to see more clearly Taylor's relation to Williams and Wolf. Like these two thinkers he worries that certain moral values can crush important goods in human life, e.g., artistic self-expression, loving relationships, and so on. This was dramatized in his example of the concert pianist foregoing a once in a lifetime opportunity to raise some extra bucks for charity. Moreover, again like Wolf and Williams, he identifies ethical deliberation with an "all things considered" perspective that balances and weighs incommensurable goods without privileging one kind of consideration in virtue of procedural stipulation. Nevertheless, while Charles Taylor's suspicion that the morality of modern moral theory cannot do justice to the *variety* of ethical goods in our lives, specifically those goods central to living a meaningful life puts him in league with Wolf and Williams, their agreement is only partial. Taylor's critique formulates the *origins of* and *alternatives to* our present situation quite differently than his sometime collaborators. Rather than urging that we should

---

[779] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 183.
[780] Taylor, "Leading a Life," 183.
[781] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 42.

downgrade the importance of morality vis-à-vis meaning-giving projects and attachments, Taylor primarily takes issue with the attempt to fit 'morality' into a procedural frame. The problem isn't that morality lays claim to greater importance than it is due, but rather that the procedural aspirations of contemporary theory give rise to distorted conceptions of morality.[782] Seen in this light, the proper response is to reject the procedural theories of morality rather than devalue 'morality' as we find in Williams and Wolf. In ways that still bear resemblance to Wolf's tactics, Taylor stresses the need to think in terms of a broader, eudaimonstic framework that recognizes "the plurality of goods" that matter to "a full life."[783]

Moreover, Taylor's sophisticated hermeneutical conception of human agency gives him the philosophical resources to avoid the worries of undermining morality (Williams) without of invoking *deus ex machina* style the self-evident objectivity of 'meaningful' endeavors to halt the slide towards amoralism (Wolf). We can reap the benefits of Wolf's move, i.e., recognizing limits on what can count as a good reason for overriding moral considerations, without getting appealing to the poorly explicated notion of objectivity that plagues her account by following Taylor in locating judgments of the good in the intersubjectively constituted web of human meanings. As we discussed in chapter four, Taylor introduces the notion of "strong evaluation" as a way of talking about substantive evaluative judgments whose validity stands independently of an agent's desires, i.e., the possibility of being mistaken to which Wolf alludes. But unlike anything in Wolf's account, strong evaluations get their resistance to subjective desire, as we saw, from intersubjectively constituted meanings. Wolf is blind to this option because she is in the grip of an overly simplistic conception of intersubjectivity. She thinks of it basically as majority rule. Since one vote one can't make something objective, as it

---

[782] This tracks at some level what Leiter takes to be the main difference between what he calls the "Morality Critics" and the "Theory Critics" lies in their point of emphasis: "The Theory Critic invokes the plurality of values to emphasize the inadequacy of a theoretical framework which excludes so much, while the Morality critic invokes the plurality of values in order to emphaize the costs of morality's OT [Overriding Thesis] and to argue against it." Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics" 261n26.

[783] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 14-15. Part of Taylor's work of "retrieval" is to remind us of "questions about 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" (respectively, 4, 14).

were, then neither can a vote of fifty, one thousand, a billion, and so on.[784] But this misunderstands the true significance of intersubjectivity for moral philosophy. The intersubjectivity of the web of meanings constituting our understanding of ethical values isn't individual voluntarism writ large. There is still room for the collective being wrong about evaluative judgments, but Taylor's point is that making this further judgment is a "transition" within our ethical self-understanding and doesn't jump outside of itself to hook our understanding on to some independently existing objective moral world. Making judgments of the good is always already within and/or between moral meanings arising in intersubjective contexts.[785] Taylor's position thus represents a further advance over both Williams and Wolf by offering us hermeneutical theoretical apparatus for understanding how judgments of 'meaningful' or 'meaninglessness' can be mistaken. Taylor's dialogical conception of practical reason corrects for the implicit monologism of Wolf and Williams.[786]

## 5.4 Moral Articulacy and the Idea of an Ethical Division of Labor

Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy challenges the assumption that we can intelligibly address questions of morally right action in isolation from questions of the good life. His plea is for a "broad" conception of "ethics" rather than a "narrow" conception of "morality."[787] Yet even if we concede the importance of addressing questions of the good life, this in itself doesn't derail projects aimed at getting clear on our moral obligations. One might still maintain an intellectual "division of labor" that sees questions of the 'good' and the 'right' as parallel, autonomous projects, a strategy defended by Will Kymlicka and (with subtle variation) by Jürgen Habermas. Recall that Kymlicka thinks that moral philosophy can focus on questions of impartial 'moral' obligation and leave questions regarding the good life to poets, pastors, and psychologists. Similarly, Habermas

---

[784] Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 46. She writes, "If an individual's valuing something isn't sufficient to give the thing real value, however, is hard to see why a group's endorsement should carry any more weight. If one person can be mistaken about value, why can't five people, or five thousand? The history of art, of for that matter of morals, seems ample testimony to the view that whole societies can be wrong."
[785] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3; Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reasoning," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), chapter 3.
[786] I have benefited from a discussion with Jonghwan Lee on this point.
[787] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-4; Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 3-4.

accepts with sobering resignation that despite being able to theoretically reconstruct the moral point of view, a project undertaken in his own discourse ethics, post-metaphysical philosophers "are unable to answer the question of why we should be moral *at all*."[788] He thus sticks to a project of formal analyses of impartial morality and abandons the "all things considered" deliberative question.

The end effect of Williams-Wolf style arguments is to turn up the heat, so to speak, on "division of labor" strategies that either neglect or presume the overriding status of morality. By resurrecting "Socrates' question," Williams presses precisely the complacent assumption that the moral point of view always must predominate in our moral thinking, even when it costs us dearly. He and Wolf give us reasons why morality's unquestioned authority ought to give us pause as it may lead to costly conflicts with certain goods like self-expression, integrity, personal projects, and loving relationships. Susan Wolf's version of this story emphasized the way these kinds of goods can nourish a life and give agents reasons to get up in the morning, i.e., she showed how they are bound up with the *meaningfulness* of life. Both thinkers suggest that situations may arise where other goods simply are more important than following the dictates of morality. But if this is true, then we cannot remain satisfied with accounts of morality that simply assume morality's primacy and fail to take the broad view.

The analysis of this chapter thus enables us to see the broader significance of Taylor's answer to Kymlicka, i.e., why we cannot remain satisfied with this bifurcated, divide-and-conquer style of moral thinking, those that sharply divide questions of the ethical good from the moral right. The underlying reason is that practical deliberation must address all goods that weigh on us. And thus we cannot remain satisfied with simply addressing the moral 'right.' Taylor writes:

> Proceduralists believe in the independence of morality, because they give it unquestioned priority. No information about the good life could alter the moral injunctions we acknowledge, because these latter always trump the former. As long as this is so, moralists can ignore the good. But this is exactly the position that seems to me untenable. There can be conflicts between morality and the good, and an a priori rule giving blind precedence to one seems gratuitous and irrational. We might be tempted to do this if we could assume that all issues of fairness were equally vital and grave, and issues of the good life equally secondary. But that is not the way it is in life. Questions of justice can vary all the way from

---

[788] Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" 4.

those which cry to heaven for vengeance to minor inequities, while issues about the good life range from relatively minor potential enrichments to what gives meaning to my life.[789]

It is the plurality of goods, the heterogeneity of values that poses a problem to divide and conquer approaches. We cannot but face the "all things considered" deliberative question that puts before us a wide range of goods. Approaches that simply bracket all but a narrowly defined conception of 'moral' obligation simply fail to deal with this question:

> Ethical life in fact faces us with choices in which everything: moral principles, goods, interests, our own future and that of others, all come into consideration. Unless we have some way of showing a priori that some of these always and exceptionlessly take precedence over others, we cannot in fact afford to segregate the discipline of practical philosophy into watertight compartments. If this is so, then the reproach I want to level at procedrualists is a serious one: that they don't give enough attention to the good to determine whether and when the moral principles they offer ought to be modified to accommodate its demands. To practise a division of labor here amounts to telling one half of the story.[790]

"Narrow" questions of 'moral' obligation must thus be situated within a broader space oriented around questions of ultimate importance to avoid the kind of perverse silencing of a certain range of goods. This also provides grounds to reject Habermas's dismissal of the "all things considered" question of practical deliberation. We cannot remain content to sketch the formal contours of the 'moral' and pass over in mourning the ultimate question of the good for we are forced to choose between morality and other goods.

This dissertation has been focusing on Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy with specific attention to the notion of 'articulacy' employed in his formulation of the issues. In closing, I want to suggest that the notion of *moral articulacy* is a useful prism through which to see the whole arc of Taylor's argument, which is only now, at the end, coming into view. The reader will recall that a central theme in Taylor's work is the connection between moral articulacy and the good. The most fundamental source of moral 'inarticulacy,' on his view, is the avoidance or suppression of the good. In chapter four we examined one sense of this argument. The same is true here, albeit with a different inflection. Whereas our earlier discussion took issue with inarticulacy stemming from an inability to see procedural morality as itself a conception of the good, resting on the same ultimate

---

[789] Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 244.
[790] Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 245.

conceptual structure as other conceptions of the good, this new line of critique objects to not placing

morality in dialogue with other judgments of the good. The isolation of judgments of the good

through procedural stipulation makes us inarticulate about how these various evaluative notions fit

together. By de-coupling judgments of importance and judgments of morality, procedural moral

theories leave us inarticulate when deliberating in the face of a plurality of goods. It is their inability

to gracefully advise on "all things considered" questions that is responsible for this final sense of

moral 'inarticulacy.' Conversely, moral articulacy requires addressing questions of morality in light of

an overall orientation toward the good.

While I have treated the two senses of 'inarticulacy' separately, i.e., as the strong and weak

readings of Taylor's thesis of ethical holism (chapter four and chapter five), these two aspects of

Taylor's critique amount to a unified strategy. They should be read, in my view, as a one-two punch,

so to speak. Recognition the full range of goods that matter to a good life pushes us toward a

broader "all things considered" deliberative perspective. Here we encounter the practical need to

integrate moral judgments with other evaluative judgments. In order to be morally articulate in our

deliberations, we need a way of talking about the relative importance of goods. Otherwise put, even

if we concede that practical reason has different faces, as Habermas suggests,[791] we must recognize

something like Aristotelian *phronesis* as the highest mode of practical reason. We could describe

Taylor's position as follows: moral thinking responsive to a full range of both ethical and moral

values presupposes an overarching orientation toward the good.

At this point we can draw on the reading developed in chapter four to reinforce the picture

of "all things considered" moral deliberation oriented toward the good. Having re-framed moral

thinking from an ultimately eudaimonistic perspective, Taylor further argues that the seemingly

radically un-Aristotelian conceptions of that we find in procedural ethics, i.e., ethics that stipulate

criteria for good practical reasoning that are independent of the good life, subscribe to a conception

of the good life for human beings, even if they deny this claim. While procedural moral theories like

---

[791] Jürgen Habermas, "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in
*Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 1-18.

Hare or Habermas can appeal to certain kinds of normativity, i.e., the normativity of logic or the normativity springing from the transcendental conditions for argumentation, these theories cannot make sense of the "background sense" of distinctively *moral* kinds of considerations. To do this would be to introduce a conception of the good explicitly into our moral thinking. But these theories are *moral* theories, even if their normative grounding is merely formal. On this basis Taylor charges them with a special kind of incoherence—namely, "inarticulacy." The proper response of this insight leads to a recoil from these supposedly neutrally grounded ethical approaches and the acknowledgement of the substantive 'good' behind the procedural 'right.' Making these substantive commitments also makes it easier to integrate an agent's deliberative space. On Taylor's view, procedural moral theories render it unclear why morality ought to have a special place in practical deliberation. But the substantive re-formulation of procedural moral theories enables us to more fully grasp the rationale for moral rules and thereby place them in common dialogue with other practical considerations. We can thus see Taylor's critique of modern moral theories as consisting of two interlocking phases. One phase stresses the importance of starting with an "all things considered" deliberative standpoint from which we can survey a wide range of various goods from the standpoint of the pursuit of the good. The second phase re-casts procedural moral theories as themselves articulations of the good, albeit inarticulate ones that cannot see themselves in that self-description. Taylor's critique thus isn't a straightforward rejection of modern moral philosophy, but rather, as we stressed in chapter one, a call for reinterpreting these theories in light of a view of the good. As the metaphor of inarticulacy suggests, it is the attempt to draw out, give voice to, and thereby reclaim the goods of modern moral theory within a more humane, euadimonistic framework. A morally articulate conception of the ethical life sees moral agents as inevitably oriented toward the good, understood in the broadest sense, and moral theories as themselves articulating, albeit in a distorting fashion, important goods like justice, equality, and freedom.

To be clear, moral articulacy understood as placing moral considerations in a common deliberative space oriented by a conception of the good has some clear conceptual benefits, but it

also *doesn't* solve all of the problems that circle debates over moral theory and morality's authority. For starters, it doesn't eliminate the problem of the *demandingness* of morality for the simple reason that the demandingness of a moral ideal need not, although it may, stem from being a decision procedure.[792] The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, for example, hardly amount to a moral theory, let alone a decision procedure and yet can be interpreted in a morally demanding manner. Conversely, we might construct a quite latitudinarian decision procedure. The key objection to procedural moral theory from Taylor's perspective is *not* that it is *too demanding* but rather that its demands do not track our judgments of ultimate importance. This is the moral to be taken from Wolf and Williams—not that morality itself is requires too much of us. Some of requirements of procedural morality strike us as too demanding because they have ceased to be tethered to judgments of ultimate importance. Thus, while Taylor's eudaimonistic model of practical deliberation doesn't eliminate the problem of demandingness, it does enable us to more articulately frame the conflict as one between competing goods of different levels of importance.

Sometimes, however, the conflicts are between multiple goods of great importance. The issue here doesn't simply concern cases where a great personal sacrifice is required for small moral gains, e.g., Taylor's example of the concert pianist foregoing a lifetime concert opportunity to make some extra cash for charity, but also more difficult cases like the examples often used by Williams.[793] Taylor's picture of practical deliberation does not eliminate these tough conflicts. Indeed, Taylor's picture, like other contemporary eudaimonistic thinkers, admits of "the tragic confrontation of good with good," to use Alasdair MacIntyre's words.[794] As Taylor writes, "There is no guarantee that universally valid goods should be perfectly combinable, and certainly not in all situations."[795] Thus, Taylor's conception of morally articulate practical deliberation eliminates neither the potential

---

[792] For an insightful discussion of the various options we face in dealing with the problem of demandingness see Scheffler, *Human Nature*, chapter 2.

[793] These examples can be found in Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" and "Moral Luck."

[794] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 224; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 61; also see Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *Moral Luck*, chapter 5.

[795] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 61.

demandingness of moral goods nor "tragic" in which two the pursuit of two goods comes into "tragic" collision.

While Taylor's way of framing practical deliberation doesn't solve all of the problems that circle around these debates, he does chart a desirable course between two unappealing alternatives.[796] The first option defines 'morality' in accordance with a procedural criterion (e.g., maximizing the greatest happiness or being universalizable, etc.) and grants it sovereign status in the kingdom of values. This position suffers from the problem that it seems to require certain sacrifices in the name of morality that fail to track with our sense of the importance of other non-moral goods. The second option relaxes the authority of morality to make room for personal projects and other meaning-giving commitments. Here we encounter the positions of Wolf and Williams. But these approaches face problems of a different kind. Williams's position, despite its insights, seems to provide theoretical sanctuary for the selfish and cruel. It lacks seems to so severely undercut morality's authority, that it has struck some of his readers as dangerously anti-moralistic. Wolf tries to remedy this by introducing 'meaningfulness' as a limiting condition on personal goods that may permissibly beat out the moral in practical deliberation. But the supposedly 'objective' value of 'meaningful' projects and attachments remains woefully underdeveloped. Taylor's position counts as a marked improvement over both extremes. As I read him, he is staking out a happy middle ground between these two unappealing extremes. Unlike the first camp, Taylor rejects the idea that we can clearly define a 'moral' realm with a procedure that clearly deserves our unconditional obedience. He displays greater sensitivity to the plurality of values and the difficulty of the conflicts stemming from them. Unlike the second camp, however, Taylor doesn't downgrade the status of morality in order to make room for other goods. He traces the problem back to the deeper misconception of sharply defining a 'moral' realm through procedural stipulation. He sees the problem as drifting from a conception of practical reasoning oriented around the good or the important. Here Taylor displays greater sensitivity to the importance of moral values and offers a picture of them as "hypergoods."

---

[796] This is a specific instantiation of the broader move of navigating between radical ethical pluralism and moral monism noted by Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 42.

This re-establishes their importance by reconnecting the normative force of the good with a judgment of its importance rather than as a principle of reasoning. By appealing to a more explicitly Aristotelian deliberative structure, one with a dose of philosophical hermeneutics, Taylor has superior resources for setting limits to selfish, cruel, and otherwise destructive "projects" without appealing to the self-evident objective value of 'meaningful' undertakings, a kind of philosophical *deus ex machina*. In the final analysis, Taylor's conception of moral articulacy thus requires that we can confront ethical dilemmas without the obstructions introduced by procedural moral theories eager to distance themselves from judgments of ultimate importance. Occupying a broadly eudaimonistic framework governed by judgments of ultimate significance, i.e., the good, enables us, on the one hand, to do justice to the plurality of goods that weigh on practical deliberation, and on the other hand, give voice more clearly to the value of moral goods.

**Chapter 6: The Shape(s) of Modern Moral Theory**

Taylor's critique of modern moral inarticulacy rests on two premises. The first makes the claim that without a conception of the good contemporary moral theory is plunged into inarticulacy. The second premise concerns the structure and content of modern moral theories—namely, that contemporary theories do, in fact, neglect the good. Taylor's critique only has bite if modern moral philosophy turns out to be of the proceduralist character he describes. We have already seen in chapter two how some naturalistic theories do not fit the "procedural" type he criticizes. This chapter raises the question of whether Taylor's conception of the actual shape and content of modern moral theories is accurate. Specifically, I defend the following three theses: (1) modern moral theory has a way of incorporating the good at various levels, (2) in at least some variants this still deals unsatisfactorily with Taylor's critique, and (3) the real force of Taylor's critique comes from his hermeneutical meta-framework and this carries with it significant implications for even those contemporary theories that do approach morality via a theory of the good.

**6.1 Modern Moral Theory and the Good**

Taylor's critics have objected that he overlooks more nuanced formulations of moral theory.[797] More specifically, they have insisted *contra* Taylor that modern moral theories have an appreciable place for the good. Ernst Tugendhat points out that even the utilitarian still must admit at least one kind of strong evaluation—namely, the difference between acting morally rightly and not.[798] Will Kymlicka has voiced a similar point against Taylor's construal of utilitarian moral theory. He writes, "It is one thing to say that utilitarians do not explain why benevolence is a value…But it is

---

[797] See, for instance, Martha Nussbaum, "Our Pasts, Ourselves," *The New Republic*, (April 9, 1990): 30; Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 155-82.

[798] Ernst Tugendhat, "Korreferat zu Charles Taylor: "What is Human Agency?" in *Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 443. He writes, "Ich sehe nicht den geringsten Grund, warum man die Entscheidung zum richigen Handeln im Sinn des Utilitarismus nicht als "starke Wertung" zu bezeichnen hätte." (443) ["I don't see the slightest reason why one could not have designated the decision to act rightly in the sense of utilitarianism as "strong evaluation."—my translation]

quite another to say that utilitarians do not expressly accord benevolence a higher moral value than,

say, egoism, or maliciousness."[799] He adds, "Only a belief in benevolence, as a qualitative distinction,

could generate utilitarianism."[800] Kymlicka's charge that Taylor underestimates the place of the good

in modern moral theory is not limited to the utilitarian theory but also includes the Kantian tradition:

"nothing in the structure of utilitarian or Kantian moral theory precludes a richer theory of the

good."[801] Moreover, even if the theorist concedes that such theories employ decision procedures,

Kymlicka maintains these still are not necessarily incompatible with conceptions of the good: "It is

true that Kantians and utilitarians invoke various procedures to ascertain the right action. But this

does not compete with, or preclude, the idea that there are substantively correct ends which define a

valuable or worthwhile life."[802] Indeed, these provide overarching frameworks of the good within

which agents can lead good lives of their own choosing: "Utilitarians and Kantians…draw on a more

abstract account of the good, in order to assess the sort of social conditions required for people to

judge and pursue more particular conceptions of the good."[803]

Such rejoinders to Taylor iterate the objection that he misrepresents the nature of moral

theory by wrongly assuming it has no place for the good. This line of argument thus challenges the

second premise in Taylor's argument by alleging that modern moral theories are not as "narrow" as

he assumes. The Kymlicka-Tugdendhat charge that modern moral theories draw on conceptions of

the good is a question that requires a look at specific theories. An exhaustive survey of all the

"proceduralist" theories would be a gargantuan task whose results would still remain vulnerable to

future proposals, re-worked theories, and novel versions of proceduralism. A more manageable (and

fruitful) approach will be to take a closer look at how the good factors into two prominent

contemporary proceduralisms representative of two dominant traditions within modern moral

philosophy—namely, the utilitarianism of R.M. Hare and the neo-Kantianism of Barbara Herman.

---

[799] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 165.
[800] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 166.
[801] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 161.
[802] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 162.
[803] Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," 168-169.

From this we can derive important, general lessons. I will argue that the results of such investigations

will reveal, on the one hand, that modern theorists have a more explicit place for the good than

Taylor allows yet, on the other hand, his critique still applies to even these more nuanced

formulations of the proceduralist vision.

## 6.2 R.M. Hare's Utilitarianism

I begin by taking up the work of R.M. Hare, the originator of arguably the most

sophisticated utilitarian theory to date.[804] Taylor's writings occasionally take issue with Hare, but his

criticisms leave much to be desired and rarely go beyond a few pointed remarks. Without considering

the details of Hare's theory, Taylor maintains we cannot explain the normative authority of morality

on Hare's view.[805] While I think Taylor is ultimately right about this charge, an engagement with the

details of Hare's theory is needed to fully make the case. Utilitarianism, it may turn out, is more

articulate than Taylor thinks. Hare's sophisticated variant presents a good test case for assessing the

bite of Taylor's critique.

### 6.2.1 Logic, Moral Intuitions, and Neutrality

The hope of finding a rational method to resolve moral disputes and thereby avoid violent

clashes between ways of life motivates Hare's work in moral theory. Given the serious nature of

many moral conflicts, the task of constructing an impartial moral theory has practical importance.

Hare warns us "unless some way is found of talking about them [moral conflicts] rationally and with

hope of agreement, violence will finally engulf the world."[806] In order to think more rationally about

moral conflicts, moral theory must, in Hare's eyes, rise above the fray of moral argument and provide

us an impartial method for moral reasoning. It is for this reason that Hare's moral philosophy begins

---

[804] See R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); R.M. Hare, *Sorting Out Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
[805] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 87-9.
[806] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, v, italics mine.

with the study of our moral language. By analyzing the meaning of our ethical concepts, he

maintains, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of "the canons of rational thinking about moral

questions" and use them as a touchstone for the rational correction of moral thought and

argument.[807] Moral philosophy, on Hare's conception, is "a *branch of logic* because its principle aim is

the discovery of ways of determining what arguments about moral questions are good ones, or how

to tell sound from unsound reasoning in this area."[808] Hare's understanding of the character of moral

philosophy as a form of logical inquiry is tied to his ambition for finding a neutral means of

adjudicating moral conflict. As Bernard Williams aptly puts this connection, "moral philosophy can

make a difference only because it has authority, and it can have authority only because of its neutral

status as a logical or linguistic subject."[809]

Given his ambitions to provide neutral means to determine what we morally ought to do,

Hare's investigation strictly prohibits the appeal to substantive moral beliefs in the formation of an

ethic. Theorists may draw on so-called "linguistic intuitions" in order to distill the logic of our moral

language, but substantive moral beliefs can play no role at all in philosophically refined moral

thinking.[810] We thus can examine the way in which our linguistic community uses language in order

to clarify the logic of our concepts. We cannot, however, appeal at any stage to substantive moral

intuitions in the theorizing process. Bringing substantive intuitions into play would be, according to

Hare, "a pernicious error" that would "wreck the entire enterprise" of philosophically clarifying

moral thinking.[811] As he puts it, "To introduce substantial moral intuitions at the critical level would

be to incorporate in critical thinking the very same weakness which it was designed to remedy."[812]

Substantive moral intuitions, as Hare sees them, are simply the result of our moral upbringings and

therefore have no prima facie moral legitimacy. Glossed by Hare as mere "prejudices," moral

---

[807] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, § 1.1, quote from p.4.
[808] Hare, *Sorting Out Ethics*, 4; cf. Hare, *Moral thinking* 4.
[809] Bernard Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. A.W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 83. My account has benefited from Williams astute reconstruction of the key moves in Hare's thinking. This was originally published in *Hare and Critics: Essays in Moral Thinking*, ed. Douglas Seanor and Nick Fotion (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988). All references will be to the republished version.
[810] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, § 1.3.
[811] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, § 1.3, quote from p. 11.
[812] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 40.

intuitions fail to be a means for justifying our moral belief. and those approaches that proceed in this manner employ, to Hare's mind, "a viciously circular procedure."[813]

Hare restricts his analysis of our moral language almost exclusively to the moral sense of 'ought,' and avoids concepts like 'duplicitous,' 'obsequious,' 'compassionate'—concepts that are in Taylor's language "qualitative distinctions"[814] or in Williams's language "thick ethical concepts."[815] Hare's restriction of his analysis to thin ethical language is not incidental to his method. Only thin ethical concepts, which contain no descriptive content, can be purely procedural and therefore provide a neutral method untainted by prejudice. Focusing on thick ethical concepts risks making us "the slaves of our language" by leaving the values built into normatively charged words unexamined.[816] The motive of uncovering a formal moral language for criticizing substantive moral beliefs thus motivates Hare's narrow focus on moral language. Focusing on the analysis of thin ethical language, in other words, offers the means by which we can reconstruct moral thinking without appealing problematic substantive intuitions.

We have seen in previous chapters how thinkers like Taylor and McDowell think we must reform ethical thought from within, as it were. Is it fair to say that Taylor-McDowell style non-foundationalist approaches to morality are mere peddlers of "prejudice"? As Bernard Williams has argued, Hare's identification of intuitions with prejudices trades on a slippage between (a) the sense of 'prejudice' as thoughtless belief and (b) the sense of 'prejudice' as a belief lacking a philosophical foundation.[817] This dichotomy tempts us to think we must embrace a strong, foundationalist moral theory in order to avoid the intellectual wasteland of unreflective prejudice. But as Bernard Williams observes, "it is quite wrong to think that the only alternative to ethical theory is to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice. Theory and prejudice are not the only possibilities for an

---

[813] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 40; cf. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 12.

[814] See Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), chapter 1 and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, part I.

[815] Bernard Williams sees this self-limitation as a general tendency of analytic moral philosophy and introduced the "thick"/"thin" distinction. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 127-131.

[816] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 18.

[817] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 117.

intelligent agent, or for philosophy."[818] Taylor's project in moral philosophy can be seen to articulate a middle version of this idea.

Moreover, Taylor's hermeneutical approach to refining moral intuitions by appealing to the way new interpretations better explain, account for, or articulate features of our moral experience left opaque by rival accounts hardly counts as "viciously circular." That claim would be warranted if it supported a given intuition by appealing to that very same intuition—e.g., as in the assertion 'I know it's wrong because it's wrong.' But that's hardly what goes on in Taylor's non-foundationalist endeavor. It only seems so if one shares Hare's optimistic desire for a foundation in ethics. As Bernard Williams put it, it is the "desire to get away from what is merely 'ours'"[819] that motivates Hare's strong claim.

Hare's theory is a clear example of a utilitarian moral theorist who does not want rest his theory on a conception of the good. To do so would, in his mind, undermine its impartiality. The justification of our moral thinking rests simply, according to Hare, on the logic implicit in our moral language, specifically the moral 'ought.' The Taylorian response is that that we cannot properly understand *moral* thought in this way because it abstracts from the moral feelings and meanings that are constitutive of the *moral* life.[820] It is a gap between theory's resources and the motivations of the theory. The normativity of morality must link up with the good at a foundational level, albeit in a non-foundationalist manner. Taylor's point goes further in suggesting that such neutrally grounded theories rely on distinctively moral motivations, e.g., the values of benevolence and importance of impartiality, despite protests to the contrary. This lends them the plausibility of being *moral* theories rather than merely theories of, say, logical conduct.[821] This is one of the basic senses in which Hare's theory could be described as "inarticulate."

---

[818] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 112.
[819] Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 83-84, quote from p. 84.
[820] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 87-9. See the discussion in chapter 4 of this thesis. A similar sentiment is expressed in Harry Frankfurt, "Rationalism in Ethics," in *Autonomes Handeln: Beträge zur Philosophie von Harry G. Frankfurt*, eds. Monika Betzler and Barbara Guckes (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 259-273.
[821] As Taylor puts it, "all these formulae for ethical decision [including those variants of utilitarianism such as we find in Hare] repose on some substantive moral insights; otherwise they would not seem even plausible

### 6.2.2 The Critical and Intuitive Levels

Given Hare's attempt to distance himself from substantive moral intuitions and his limited focus on our thinnest moral language, it would seem unlikely "thick" ethical notions or "qualitative distinctions" would play much of a role in his philosophy. Nevertheless, he does give them a special place in his moral theory. It may even seem that his theory can accommodate at least some of our language of the good. In this section I want to examine Hare's strategy for absorbing our thicker evaluative concepts.

How does R.M. Hare's utilitarian moral theory incorporate a conception of the good, specifically what Taylor calls "qualitative distinctions"? The key to grasping the answer to this question is understanding his distinction between two levels of moral thinking—the so-called "intuitive" and the "critical" levels of moral thought.[822] This gives our wide array of substantive ethical concepts a place within the overarching moral theory but a role regulated by a governing utilitarian moral principle. As we shall see, this principle doesn't function as an algorithm for practical deliberation but rather as a higher-order principle that indirectly structures and justifies our moral thinking.

What does moral thinking look like when corrected by the logic of our moral language? Hare's analysis proceeds from the observation that moral judgments can logically contradict other moral judgments. In practice this means that one cannot affirm a given moral judgment in one situation and deny it in a logically similar situation. This feature of moral judgments is commonly called "universalizability."[823] Hare argues that this basic feature of moral judgments generates the content of utilitarian morality.[824] His argument runs roughly as follows. The universalization principle

---

candidates as models of *ethical* reasoning." Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 231, italics in original. This point is further elaborated later in his work when he writes, "defenders of the most antiseptic procedural ethic are unavowedly inspired by visions of the good." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 504.

[822] R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, chapters 2 and 3; this distinction is found in all but name in R.M. Hare "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, eds. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 23-38.

[823] See Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, chapter 2; Hare, *Moral Thinking*, § 1.6

[824] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, especially chapters 5 and 6. For a succinct version of the argument see Hare, "Ethical theory and utilitarianism," 25-29.

(U-principle) requires that an agent cannot both affirm a moral judgment in one situation and deny it in a logically similar context. This means that an individual cannot make an exception of herself when it comes to moral judgments. From here Hare moves to the claim that the U-principle requires an agent to consider any given moral judgment from the position of all affected standpoints. In affirming that 'x ought to φ in context C,' an agent is committing herself logically to affirming that judgment from the perspectives of all persons possibly affected by the φing in the context C. This requires gathering the information surrounding what other agents want and how actions will affect them. Given this information, Hare concludes that the logic of moral language directs us to aggregate the satisfaction of preferences from all parties involved. If Hare is right, a kind of utilitarianism emerges rather straightforwardly from a simple logical constraint, and this provides the basis for resolving moral conflict regardless of an individual agent's moral sensibility. As he puts it, "if we assumed a perfect command of logic and of the facts, they would constrain so severely the moral evaluations that we can make, that in practice we would be bound all to agree to the same ones."[825]

Setting aside the question of whether Hare's derivation of the utilitarian procedure works, I want to focus on how he relates it to everyday moral life. Hare's account of critical moral thinking is keyed to very specific situations and requires a lot of information about an agent's circumstances, both in regard to the relevant causes and agent-preferences involved. This presents a problem for the ordinary moral agent, who is strapped for both time and mental resources. She only has a limited amount to devote to moral reflection. How can she be expected to live up to this standard of perfect logical and factually informed thinking? No one can. Hare's theory faces a problem common to all decision procedures—namely, they "may be cumbersome, inefficient, time-consuming, or in other ways ill suited to the circumstances."[826] For this reason Hare introduces the distinction between two

---

[825] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 6.
[826] Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 46. We will return to this in section 5.4.

levels of moral thought—the "*critical level*" and "*intuitive level.*" This is his attempt to fit together

rigorous moral theory with messy, ordinary moral life.[827]

The critical level involves a close look at a specific situation. With a complete grasp of the

relevant knowledge, an agent is able to determine whether or not a specific action is universalizable.

What the critical level yields is thus a judgment with a hyper-specific rule. Hare thus describes the

critical level as "a kind of act utilitarianism which, because of the unviersalizability of moral

judgments, is practically equivalent to a rule-utilitarianism whose rules are allowed to be of any

required degree of specificity."[828] The everyday moral dealings of a moral agent, by contrast, are too

coarse, crude, and under pressure to employ critical level thinking all of the time. We need to be

reasonable in our demands on human cognition and empathy. This is where the intuitive level comes

into play. It is on this level that we find a much more general version of rule utilitarianism. Agents

operating in real time, as opposed to the infinite, frozen time of Hare's archangelic ideal-spectator,

simply can't discover all of the relevant information for arriving at the right thing to do.[829]  Hare

introduces the intuitive level as a means of holding on to his ideal, logical standard while

accommodating the shortcomings of human agents. Hare thus describes human moral intuitions,

which he absorbs into the intuitive level of his theory, as "a compromise imposed by the coarseness

of the pupil's discrimination and the inability of his human educators to predict with any accuracy the

scrapes he will get into."[830] In contrast to the critical level, which operates in terms of highly tailored

universal prescriptions, the intuitive level necessarily operates in terms of rough generalizations.

Hare's basis for distinguishing between the intuitive and critical levels is pragmatic in nature.

In theory, one could do away with the distinction if human beings (a) had greater access to

information concerning the effects of their actions, (b) better understood the preferences of others

---

[827] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, chapters 2 and 3; also see Hare, "Ethical theory and utilitarianism," 31-36; For a technical yet astute reconstruction of the logic generating the intuitive/critical level split in Hare see Williams "The Structure of Hare's Theory." I have benefited from Williams's penetrating analysis.

[828] Hare, "Ethical theory and utilitarianism," 31. He also writes, "Specific rule-utilitarianism is appropriate to level-2 thinking, general rule-utilitarianism to level-1 thinking; and therefore the rules of specific rule-utilitarianism can be of unlimited specificity, but those of general rule-utilitarianism have to be general enough for their role." Hare, "Ethical theory and utilitarianism," 33.

[829] For the image of the Archangel see Hare, *Moral Thinking*, chapter 3.

[830] Hare, "Ethical Theory and utilitarianism," 36.

and (c) could use this information to determine what action would satisfy the most people. Human limitations force us to make a distinction between a purely rational standard for thinking (the critical level) and the best standard in light of human frailty (the intuitive level). As Hare writes, "The most that human beings can ask for, when they are trying to do the best critical thinking they can, is some way of *approximating,* perhaps not at all fully, to the thought-processes of an archangel."[831] The key point is that Hare introduces the split between critical and intuitive thinking for pragmatic reasons. It is due to human limitations that the intuitive level earns a place in moral thinking—and nothing else. The lower level of rough and ready moral concepts and dispositions is a necessary feature of human moral thinking because we are incapable of assessing all of the relevant features of a moral situation in real time. The key point here is that the basement of moral thinking, where we spend the bulk of our time, is, however, *in principle* eliminable. If human beings were smarter and more perceptive of others' desires, they could in theory dispense with the intuitive level. It's there because we need it, but in itself it is nothing more than a moral crutch.

The critical level interacts with the intuitive level in two ways: it provides the ultimate justification for our intuitive level moral principles and it provides the basis for interventions in the intuitive level.[832] The critical level functions as the criterion for selecting the permissible content of the intuitive level of thinking. It determines acceptable lower level principles. The aforementioned universalization procedure ultimately picks out what is morally right, even if agents cannot always deliberate in accordance with the universalization test.[833] Those lower level principles, concepts, and habits are deemed justified insofar as they get us as close as possible to the results of the critical level's procedure. Hare describes this justificatory relationship as follows:

> The result will be a set of general principles, constantly evolving, but on the whole stable, such that their use in moral education, including self-education, and their consequent

---

[831] Hare, *Moral Thinking,* 122, italics mine.
[832] For a clear statement of this see Hare, "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," 32. For an extended discussion of how the critical level shapes and intervenes in the intuitive level see Hare, *Moral Thinking,* chapters 2 and 3.
[833] For similar distinctions see also David O. Brink, "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (August 1986), 417-438; Scheffler, *Human Morality,* 37-38; Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13 (Spring 1984), §§ 6 and 7.

acceptance by the society at large will lead to the *nearest possible approximation to the prescriptions of archangelic thinking*. They will be the set of principles with the *highest acceptance-utility*.[834]

Our intuitive level moral concepts and principles are thus not static. Rather the goal is to find moral generalizations that reliably lead moral agents to get close to the mark of the critical level without actually requiring the conscious use of the procedure in deliberation. These lower level concepts and principles may change as moral agents learn more about their general consequences or as the conditions under which moral agents live change.

For Hare the critical level provides the basis for intervening in the intuitive level in two ways: it helps us resolve conflicts between principles at this level and it also fills out our moral understanding in cases where our intuitions fail us.[835] The intuitive level consists of fairly general principles, e.g., that deceiving others is wrong or that causing unnecessary harm should be avoided. But these are not simply general rules. Rather these moral conceptions take hold in "very firm and deep dispositions and feelings" and are thus not to be understood as mere "rules of thumb."[836] As Hare writes, "Any attempt to drive a wedge between the principles and the feelings will falsify the facts about our intuitive thinking. *Having* the principles, in the usual sense of the word, is having the disposition to experience the feelings, though it is not, as some intuitionists would have us believe, incompatible with submitting the principles to critical thought when that is appropriate and safe."[837] For Hare this gloss on the intuitive level explains why moral conflicts are so hard for us. We are attached to the various moral principles we employ at this level. It also explains why moral conflicts are thought to be intractable.[838]

---

[834] Hare, "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," 33. Italics mine. Also see p. 31 where Hare writes, "Level-1 principles are inculcated in moral education; but the selection of level-1 principles for this purpose should be guided by leisured thought, resulting in level-2 principles for specific considered situations, the object being to have those level-1 principles whose general acceptance will lead to actions in accord with the best level-2 principles in most situations that are actually encountered." Or as Hare puts it in *Moral Thinking*, "well conducted critical thought will justify the selection of prima facie principles on the ground that the general acceptance of them will lead to actions which do as much good, and as little harm, as possible." (p. 62)
[835] Hare, "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," 32.
[836] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 38. Williams emphasizes this aspect of Hare's theory in his treatment of it and it plays, as we shall see, a key role in his critique of Hare. See especially his "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 80-81.
[837] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 38-39.
[838] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 26.

Let's now return to Taylor's critique. From the perspective of Hare's intuitive/critical level distinction, we can see how he might reasonably claim to absorb "qualitative distinctions" within the confines of his theory. Not only can he grant a place for a wide range of substantive moral concepts, which he does in general intuitive judgments expressed by concepts like 'honesty,' but in virtue of their tight link to moral emotions these concepts and judgments are imbued with a certain gravity. This has the upshot, in Williams's words, of "saving the appearances of moral experience."[839] The intuitive level thus seems to give Hare a way of making sense of the fact that substantive moral intuitions also matter to moral agents because they are bound up with powerful emotions. For Taylor it is crucial to remember *how* moral agents relate to moral considerations, and Hare's rich conception of the intuitive level appears to provide a space for agents to relate to moral considerations in the way Taylor has in mind. This point is crucial because it seemingly provides Hare grounds on which to claim that his utilitarian moral theory can incorporate qualitative distinctions at the level of everyday moral judgment, even if they play no role in the grounding of the theory.

### 6.2.3 Transparency and Articulacy

Despite appearances of framing our languages of the good within a broader moral theory that justifies and corrects our moral judgments, Hare's two-level structure does violence to our moral experience. By instrumentalizing the qualitative distinctions we use in our moral interpretations of everyday life, it distorts the agent's relationship to moral considerations and thus fails to enable moral articulacy. This point is most clearly brought out by Bernard Williams's critique of Hare. As I read Williams, his defense of transparency in ethics puts us within eyesight of Taylor's notion of articulacy. In this section I will attempt to draw out this connection.

Williams points to a tension between two different ways of conceiving of and relating to morality in Hare's intuitive/critical divide. Recall that for Hare the lower level is justified by the fact of pragmatic necessity. The reason he introduces these lower level intuitive judgments into moral

---

[839] Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 81.

theory is to make it humanly manageable. Consequently, our thick ethical notions are justified in an entirely instrumental fashion. What justifies picking out any concept or principle as a good one for the intuitive level simply is its "acceptance-utility," which means that if generally followed it gets us closest to the ideal standard of critical thinking. Williams's argument against Hare turns on the claim that it is incoherent to simultaneously conceive of the lower, intuitive level as a place of deep attachments and to conceive of the relationship between the two levels as a matter of instrumental efficacy. Williams puts this in terms of inner and outer perspectives. Hare's theory, he argues, "has no assurance that these two things, the external view of what morality is, and the internal representation of it in moral practice, will necessarily fit together."[840] Indeed, Williams offers us good reasons to think that the two levels cannot fit together in the way Hare imagines because they aren't simply *levels* of thinking but rather radically different *modes of self-understanding.* He writes:

> The objection is specifically to Hare's kind of theory, which represents the intuitive responses as deeply entrenched, surrounded by strong moral emotions, sufficiently robust to see the agent through situations in which sophisticated reflection might lead him astray, and so on; and yet at the same time explains those responses as a device to secure utilitarian outcomes. The theory ignores the fact that the responses are not merely a black-box mechanism to generate what is probably the best outcome under confusing conditions. Rather, they *constitute a way of seeing the situation*; and you cannot combine seeing the situation in that way, from *the point of view of those dispositions*, with seeing it in the archangel's way, in which all that is important is maximum preference satisfaction, and the dispositions themselves are merely a means towards that.[841]

Intuitive and critical levels cannot relate to each other in the way imagined by Hare, who thinks about it as analogous to the relationship between military tactics and the final goal of military action.[842] Hare's analogy is a bad one. Strategic thinking addresses the question of which means will best bring about victory, the sought after aim of military action. The relation between the two is essentially instrumental. As a consequence, there is no conflict between the moving between the two levels of thinking. But this analogy simply begs the question of whether an instrumental understanding of the

---

[840] Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 80.
[841] Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 80. Italics mine; Cf. Bernard Williams, "The Primacy of Dispositions," in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, 71.
[842] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 52; Hare, "Comments on Williams," in *Hare and Critics*, ed. Douglas Seanor and Nick Fotion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 289-290.

relationship between moral theory and ordinary moral reaction is appropriate. *This* is Williams's objection.[843]

The thrust of Williams's critique is that we cannot assimilate our ordinary ethical understanding to an instrumental model because it fails to recognize the integrity of the intuitive level. Properly understood, the deeply internalized ethical conceptions and emotional reactions constitutive of Hare's intuitive level generate a distinctive "point of view" or standpoint of value that resists instrumentalization. When I come to understand certain acts as demeaning and aspire to treat others with dignity, I develop a mode of relating to others responsive to their perceived value. While Hare's intuitive level could accommodate this on the intuitive level, the *mode* in which I would have to relate to this value from the critical level would be as a good way to maximize preference satisfaction. But Williams's claim is that this isn't how I understand the value or why I care about it from the intuitive level. The two-level approach distorts the *manner* in which I relate to what I value morally.

While Hare acknowledges that our intuitive responses are not simply guidelines but rather deeply internalized ethical conceptions, he doesn't go far enough in recognizing the interconnection between intuitive level concepts, an agent's sense of value, and her identity. The ethical self-understanding expressed by Hare's intuitive level is, properly construed, a standpoint of value and one partially constitutive of *who* we are as agents. We understand ourselves in terms of those lower level values and they are necessarily caught up in the web of significances that make up our lives. Williams writes,

> moral dispositions and indeed other loyalties and commitments, have a certain depth or thickness: they cannot simply be regarded, least of all by their possessor, just as devices for generating actions or states of affairs. Such dispositions and commitments will characteristically be what gives one's life some meaning, and gives one some reason for living it; they can be said, to varying degrees and variously over time, to contribute to one's practical or moral identity. There is simply no conceivable exercise that consists in stepping

---

[843] See Williams' rejection of this analogy on the grounds that the intuitive and critical levels can conflict while tactics and goals cannot. See his "The Structure of Hare's Theory," 79-80.

completely outside myself and from that point of view evaluating *in toto* the dispositions, projects, and affections that constitute the substance of my own life.[844]

The intuitive and critical levels, properly understood, Williams's argument runs, amount to two different standpoints of value, and an agent's personal identity is understood in terms of the thick concepts and related feelings of the intuitive level.

These remarks point to a special kind of theoretical failure—namely, a clash between two evaluative standpoints. While the intuitive level can be understood in terms of its instrumental value from the standpoint of the critical level, the intuitive level itself brings into play another standpoint of value, the one with which we most closely identify. We thus confront two standpoints, which Williams describes using the language of inner and outer, and these different standpoints amount to two different moral worlds. An agent's everyday ethical self-understanding, which Hare attempts to capture with his notion of the intuitive level, provides a moral agent with reasons that themselves cannot be understood in terms of rough approximations that are internalized for the sake of guaranteeing reliable approximations to the standard set by the critical level. In Williams's words, "There is a deeply uneasy gap or dislocation in this type of theory, between the spirit of the theory itself and the spirit it supposedly justifies."[845] The tension is between a first-order evaluative standpoint and a second-order, external evaluative standpoint that views the first-order standpoint as a means to its end.

While this point might seem to be salient only to Hare's version of utilitarian theory, Williams makes clear in other writings that he thinks it has far broader implications for how we think of moral theory. For starters, in applies to other forms of utilitarianism:

> These styles of indirect utilitarianism involve a special view of the dispositions that are exercised at the everyday or intuitive level; and this raises a serious question: Is there anywhere in the mind or in society that a theory of this kind can be coherently or acceptably located? The theory finds a value for these dispositions, but it is still an instrumental value. The dispositions are seen as devices for generating certain actions, and those actions are the means by which certain states of affairs, yielding the most welfare, come about. This is what those dispositions look like *when seen from the outside*, from the point of view of the utilitarian

---

[844] Bernard Williams, "The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995), 169-170.
[845] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 108.

consciousness. But it is not *what they seem from the inside.* Indeed, the utilitarian argument implies that they should *not* seem like that from the inside. The dispositions help to form the character of an agent who has them, and they will do the job the theory has given them only if the agent does not see his character purely instrumentally, but sees the world from the point of view of that character. *Moreover, the dispositions require the agent to see other things in a noninstrumental way.* They are dispositions not simply of action, but of feeling and judgment, and they are expressed precisely in ascribing intrinsic and not instrumental value to things as truthtelling, loyalty, and so on.[846]

Williams uses the metaphor of "location" to describe ways in which this "gap" between evaluative perspectives can arise, and if they are to have any role in human life at all, must be held by *somebody*. In Sidgwick's case this was the utilitarian intelligensia. In Hare's case the division is situated within the moral agent. Williams's argument proceeds by showing that both of these formulations are unsatisfactory. Making moral theory the exclusive property of a handful of utilitarian theorists who aim to remake society in accordance with producing the greatest happiness lacks what Williams calls "transparency," i.e., the ability for people to understand accurately their own morality.[847] This is not possible on Sidgwick's model, Williams maintains, because the dispositions that produce the greatest happiness tend to wither away when seen merely as instrumentally beneficial. It is, we might now recognize, the same structural problem that afflicts Hare's theory.[848] We cannot, Williams's underscores, expect an agent to simultaneously hold on to both her first-order self-interpretation and her second-order utilitarian re-interpretation of that first-order self-interpretation. Alternating between viewpoints isn't an acceptable solution. As Williams puts it: "It is artificial to suppose that a thorough commitment to the values of friendship and so on can merely alternate, on a timetable prescribed by calm or activity, with an alien set of reflections."[849] Williams's basic contention is thus that Hare's theory makes assumptions about moral agency that are fundamentally problematic. The intuitive/critical level distinction fails as a coherent existential possibility.

---

[846] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 107-8. Italics Mine. Also see Bernard Williams, "The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics," 164.

[847] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 101-102, 108-110.

[848] See the discussion of the continuity and discontinuity between Hare and Sidgwick in Williams, "The Structure of Hare's Theory."

[849] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 109.

But this is also not simply a utilitarian problem. Williams goes so far as to suggest that this is a problem with moral theory as such. He writes:

> My own view is that *no ethical theory can render a coherent account of its own relationship to practice*: it will always run into some version of the fundamental difficulty that the practice of life, and hence also an adequate theory of that practice, will require the recognition of what I have called *deep dispositions*; but at the same time *the abstract and impersonal view that is required if the theory is to be genuinely a theory cannot be satisfactorily understood in relation to the depth and necessity of those dispositions.* Thus the theory will remain, in one way or another, in an *incoherent relation to practice*. But if ethical theory is anything, then it must stand in close and explicable relation to practice, because that is the kind of theory it would have to be. It thus follows that there is *no coherent ethical theory.*[850]

Seen in the broadest light, the fundamental point here is that moral theory runs into problems when it re-interprets moral agents' ordinary moral self-understanding and simultaneously requires them to hold on to that understanding. The radically different ways of valuing in the two perspectives is not intelligibly compatible. The general point is that no moral theory is acceptable that reinterprets an agent's first-order moral reactions in ways that are unintelligible to her from her own perspective.

Williams's critique of the intuitive/critical level distinction articulates why it is unintelligible to think of Hare's moral theory (and those like him) as incorporating languages of the good into a broader deliberative framework. Williams's notion of "*transparency*" and Taylor's talk of "*inarticulacy*" point to similar phenomena and share a common ground. Both thinkers are concerned with how moral agents relate to their own moral values, and both critics claim that moral theory radically misrepresents the agent's own perspective on them. Williams's critique of theory's lack of "transparency" does this by suggesting the theories provide a higher-order re-interpretation of an agent's sense of value that doesn't fit with the agent's perspective. Where the agent sees something of intrinsic value, the theory sees only an instrument to another type of good. The complaint is that theory requires (self-)deception at some level. This can assume, as we saw above, both social and individual forms. Similarly, Taylor's notion of moral articulacy draws to our attention how moral

---

[850] Williams, "The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics," 171, italics mine. In an attempt to defend a utilitarian position, Brink argues the type of objection discussed in this section is a pervasive problem for moral theory rather than just utilitarian theory. But the conclusion to draw is not that utilitarianism suffers from a more general ailment, but rather that we should rethink the project of moral theory as a whole. See Brink, "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View," 429.

238

theories can misrepresent the agent's relation to her own moral values. Moral inarticulacy occurs when an agent cannot express within the terms allowed by a theory, the conception(s) of the good that actually inspire her moral commitment. The restrictions built into the theory stymie her self-expression. This can itself turn into a kind of self-deception when the actual moral motivations behind are covered over by a supposedly neutral grounding.[851] We might say that both Taylor and Williams are suspicious that moral theory breeds inauthenticity with regard to one's own moral commitments.[852] A lack of transparency, I want to suggest, is a form of inarticulacy insofar as moral theories reframe moral goods in such a way that our own connection with them is unintelligible from the agent's perspective.

To conclude our discussion of Hare's relation to the good, we have seen how his theory (1) explicitly rejects a conception of the good at the level of philosophical grounding. In his view, to accept any substantive moral notions from the outset would fundamentally compromise moral theory, which aspires to impartiality. Nevertheless, his theory still (2) admits substantive moral notions as kinds of short-cuts for getting utilitarian results in a fast-paced world that allows no time for the kind of complex calculations a utilitarian Archangel would require. But this way of relating moral theory to the good fails to adequately respond to Taylor's concerns. First, the attempt to construct an account of morality with no reference to a subject's moral intuitions is itself implausible, if Taylor's moral psychology is correct. The reason is simply that our moral intuitions are our way into the moral domain. Moreover, absorbing our languages of the good and our evaluative reactions by treating them as instrumental to a foreign value cannot be understood as expressing the good. While they might give languages of the good a nominal place within the broader theory, it comes at a significant cost—namely, it distorts and misrepresents the manner in which moral agents relate to

---

[851] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 9-10, 93, 100.

[852] Williams notes that he and Taylor share the belief that "modern moral theories…lack the resources to display their own ethical appeal." Bernard Williams, "Replies," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 203. For his extended defense and immanent critique of authenticity see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991). The place of authenticity in Williams's thought has been beautifully discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre in "The Elusive Starting-Point of Deliberation: A Crux in Bernard Williams's Thought" presented at the *Ethics and the Place of Philosophy* conference held at the University of Chicago on October 28-29, 2011.

their own moral values. While the theory invites agents to deliberate and live their lives in terms of

qualitative evaluations between better and worse ways of living saturated by a plurality of values, it

then robs these categories of their own value and assigns to them a wholly foreign status. We can

thus learn a general lesson from Hare's theory. Moral articulacy requires not just that a theory avail

itself to thick evaluative notions or qualitative distinctions, but also that these concepts are

understood in the right way. They cannot be re-conceived in terms of a foreign value (e.g.,

instrumental value) without robbing them of their power for articulation.

## 6.3 Barbara Herman's Neo-Kantianism

Taylor's treatment of Kantian ethics is more favorable than his treatment of utilitarianism in

two regards. First, by distinguishing acting from self-interest from acting from duty, Kantian ethics

makes room for a distinction between "higher" and "lower" motivations.[853] Taylor sees this feature

of moral phenomenology obscured in other competing theories, especially utilitarianism.[854] Second,

Kantian ethics has traditionally explained the ultimate basis of moral obligation in terms of the kind

of being we are—namely, rational ones. In Taylor's language it articulates a "constitutive good" that

explains why it is good to be moral.[855] In a perhaps somewhat revisionist manner, Taylor sees

orthodox Kantianism as resting its account of the moral right on a substantive conception of the

good. Nevertheless, Taylor's judgment of contemporary neo-Kantianism is less favorable. The re-

formulations of Kantianism reigning today primarily restrict themselves, Taylor maintains, to merely

formal procedures of settling moral conflicts. As a consequence, they jettison the resources needed to

articulate the conception of the good upon which the intelligibility of their claims rest.[856] By

---

[853] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 83-4.
[854] This purported failure of utilitarianism to not recognize qualitative distinctions leads Taylor to write, "The utilitarian lives within a moral horizon which cannot be explicated by his own moral theory." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 31.
[855] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 94; See also Charles Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," in *Weakening Philosophy*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), 71.
[856] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3. Taylor's whipping boys on this point are primarily Hare and Habermas. For his critique of Habermas see especially Charles Taylor, "Language and Society" in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action*, ed. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 23-35. For an extension of the Taylor-Habermas debate see William

introducing a set of novel concepts into her moral theory, however, Barbara Herman's version of neo-Kantianism corrects for the deficiencies of overly formalistic treatments of Kantian ethics. I thus take up her reading of Kantian moral theory as a prominent figure who challenges Taylor's narrative regarding the place of the good in modern moral theory.

### 6.3.1 Maxims and Rules of Moral Salience

Herman's re-articulation of Kantianism begins by reminding us that Kant is giving us a kind of theory of the good—namely, a theory of the good will.[857] Consequently, in contrast to other neo-Kantian formalists, she underscores the significance of focusing on the maxims of agents. A 'maxim' represents an action through the prism of an agent's motivation in undertaking the action. It expresses an agent's take on her action. She writes, "The point of using maxims as the object of moral assessment is to have actions judged *as they are willed by the agent.*"[858] A maxim, as Herman understands it, incorporates all things necessary to explain an agent's understanding of the justifiability of her action: "If the maxim is to represent the way an agent wills—how, to put it somewhat dramatically, she sets herself to change the world for what she takes to be good reasons— the maxim should include all aspects of both action and end that the agent would offer as justification for her acting as she intends to act."[859] This includes a wide range of elements:

> Maxims thus represent the subjective justification of agents' choices, including their sense of means-ends fit, consistency with other ends, and judgments of permissibility or obligatoriness. The full relevance to agents of their *perceived context of action*—their different connections and commitments—is thus *reflected in their maxims and available for moral assessment.*[860]

---

Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1994), Part II; Nicholas H. Smith, *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997), Chapter 6.

[857] See Barbara Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, *Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), chapter 10.
[858] Barbara Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment,* 76. italics mine.
[859] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 221. For another interesting, contemporary take on maxims see Onora O'Neill, "Consistency in action," in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), chapter 5.
[860] Barbara Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Judgment," in *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 34. Italics mine.

Since the volitional lives of moral agents are carried on in specific contexts, an agent's maxim must incorporate these various contextual elements. This means, as Herman emphasizes, that Kantian ethics must start from a situated standpoint. In virtue of all of the presupposed relationships that go into any action, an agent's maxim contains all of the traces of an agent's context that makes sense of an action from her point of view.

Taking the maxim as her starting point, Herman places the thick, contextual features of an agent's ethical self-understanding at the center of Kantian moral theory. Given that an agent's volitional life is carried out in a certain idiom, these thick, local languages show up in her maxims. A maxim thus reflects the contingent historical terms and cultural-institutional background involved in willing. In her words:

> Context specificity comes with the agent's maxim—a principle that describes an action as it is taken to be choiceworthy, containing, therefore, the local descriptive and evaluative concepts an agent uses in making her choice. Further, moral judgment will have no purchase on a maxim unless it is described using morally salient concepts *prior* to any use of the categorical imperative. And these concepts, like others an agent uses, will be social and local.[861]

A maxim focus thus refers us back to the variety of local evaluative concepts that we use to make sense of what we are doing. And these concepts, as Herman further argues, must necessarily be shared with other moral agents. By focusing moral theory on the inward space of maxims we are immediately pointed back outward at a world shared with other moral agents. The moral categories we use in willing are themselves supported by shared judgments and practices.[862]

This has significant implications for how we understand Kantian moral theory. Insofar as an agent's self-understanding in an undertaking involves substantive ethical notions, they will necessarily surface in the content of our maxims. But injecting thickness into the Kantian system, while it enriches it substantially, doesn't change the basic framework. Maxims, regardless of their thick

---

[861] Barbara Herman, "Training to Autonomy," in *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 143-144.
[862] See Herman, "Training to Autonomy," 144-145. She writes, "The basic features of the world that require our moral attention are identified in socially determined ways. Initially, at least, we acquire our most basic moral concepts—of harm and injury, of property and agreement—as part of a social practice. Although through experience and reflection we may extend or modify our moral lexicon, we risk a loss of moral intelligibility if we set too much on our own." Herman, "Training to Autonomy," 144.

character, remain subject to the rule of categorical imperative, which tests maxims for permissibility. That maxims have content is a precondition for the test. This means that a Kantian theory cannot do without some kind of moral pre-understanding that supplies the content for the CI to test. She writes:

> because the CI procedure assesses maxims of action and because maxims contain only those descriptive elements that belong to an agent's conception of his action and circumstances, the CI cannot be an effective practical principle of judgment *unless agents have some moral understanding of their actions before they use the CI procedure*...the claim that such *prior knowledge* is necessary follows from the structure of the CI as a practical principle of judgment.[863]

The categorical imperative's universalization test can't get a grip on its object, an agent's maxim, without the ethical vocabulary that is used by the agent to present her actions, intentions, and motives within the meanings of her world. If the categorical imperative tests for the moral rightness of an agent's willing, we need a way of talking about what the agent is actually willing. Kantian theory thus requires that theoretical reflection start from within the perspective of situated agents. Herman's position exposes an internal rationale for the incorporation of the substantive ethical categories into the heart of Kantian moral theory.

Herman refers to the "prior moral knowledge"[864] presupposed by the categorical imperative as "rules of moral salience" (RMS). She writes:

> It is useful to think of the moral knowledge needed by Kantian agents (prior to making moral judgments) as knowledge of a kind of moral rule. Let us call them 'rules of moral salience.' Acquired as elements in a moral education, they structure an agent's perception of his situation so that what he perceives is a world with moral features. They enable him to pick out those elements of his circumstances or of his proposed actions that require moral attention.[865]

We might thus think about our general ethical concepts as modes of sorting the world according to categories relevant to moral life. Identifying an act as 'cheating' tags it in a morally relevant way and presupposes that we could recognize when acting a certain way would given an agent an illegitimate

---

[863] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 77.
[864] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 77.
[865] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 77.

advantage. Above all, RMS refer to a perceptual capacity to pick out morally relevant features of our lives. As Herman puts it, "The rules of moral salience constitute the structure of moral sensitivity."[866]

We can distinguish two roles that RMS play in Herman's account. I will call these the *constitutive* and *indicative* roles. On the one hand, if the categorical imperative tests maxims, and maxims require content delivered by RMS, then we could not in principle deploy the categorical imperative without first having a content-loaded maxim. Without a descriptive vocabulary, including thick evaluative vocabulary, a moral agent wouldn't even have a way of describing her actions in an ethically relevant way at all. RMS are necessary for testable volitional acts. She writes, "the role of the RMS in moral judgment is to provide the descriptive moral categories that permit the formulation of maxims suitable for assessment by the CI procedure of judgment."[867] If the categorical imperative is to function as a test, then it needs something to test, and RMS supply the categories necessary for a volitional life rich enough to be tested.[868]

The second role of the rules of moral salience, which I have called the *indicative* role, comes into play as a sign that explicit moral deliberation is necessary. Herman recognizes that moral agents can't engage in explicit moral deliberation all of the time. She distinguishes between "moral judgment," which is the on-going, pre-deliberative activity of ethical assessment and explicit "moral

---

[866] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 78.

[867] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 84. This constitutive reading of RMS seemingly runs counter to some remarks made by Herman. For instance, Herman writes, "An action can be judged through the CI procedure without the agent's being aware that it has moral import (by someone other than the agent, for example). And an agent could bring a maxim to the CI without any sense that it posed moral difficulties and only subsequently discover its impermissibility. So *the CI procedure can function without RMS*—they are not part of the formal system of judgment. But I do not think these are the routine uses of the CI as a practical procedure of moral judgment. For those, agents have to know when to bring maxims to the CI and, to know that, they have to know the moral marks of their actions and circumstances." (Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 78). Here, however, Herman seems to be talking about how we can use the CI procedure without having been tipped off, as it were, by the RMS. Nevertheless, without a minimal level of self-understanding for characterizing the act at all, we wouldn't have anything to test. So as I read this above statement, Herman's point is simply that given a existing description of an act, even from a standpoint other than the moral agent's perspective, we can assess the act, although the RMS weren't necessary to *indicate* to us that the act requires assessment. This passage shows the non-necessity of what I'm calling the indicative role of RMS—not the non-necessity of the constitutive role of RMS.

[868] Cf. Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 111-134. In criticism of some contemporary neo-Kantians Putnam writes, "Without our human manifold *values*, there is no vocabulary for *norms* (Korsgaard's 'laws') to be stated in" (119). And again, "our imperfect but indefinitely perfectible ability to recognize the demands made upon us by various values is precisely what provides Kantian (or 'discourse') ethics with *content*" (134).

deliberation" to mark this fact. She writes, "What I call moral deliberation is occasional, in the sense that something occasions it; moral judgment is routine. While all moral action requires moral judgment, we do not need to deliberate morally in order to act morally. We deliberate as a way of figuring something out."[869] This gives her a way of talking about the flow of a normal moral agent's responsiveness to morally salient features of her situation and the conditions that make it possible for a moral agent to live without the incessant, nagging task of deliberating about every detail, every action, regardless of how small. She elaborates:

> For morality to perform its central function of securing routine action, moral concepts and features of character need to be acquired in the ongoing process of moral education so that a morally literate agent is able to recognize and respond to what is morally salient in the routine circumstances she encounters...This is, for the most part, nondeliberative...the morally literate agent moves among persons without the need to think whether she should or could shove them aside, use their body parts for this or that good cause, or tell the truth when asked for the time of day.[870]

According to Herman, moral agents engage in explicit moral deliberation structured by the categorical imperative only when they feel like something is amiss: "It is because they already realize that the actions they want to do are morally questionable that they test their permissibility."[871] The RMS serve to highlight morally salient features of a situation that may allow for exceptions in difficult cases: "The issue that brings the agent to the CI is his feeling that the need or interest involved may justify making an exception to the moral rule."[872] The content of various RMS indicate to a moral agent when she needs to engage in moral deliberation. The fact that an action would be one of 'deception,' Herman notes, does not immediately disqualify it, but it does call for "moral review," i.e., conscious deliberation with reference to the categorical imperative as the criterion of permissibility.[873] Since our RMS give us an initially reliable way for dealing with situations in a morally right manner, "we do not imagine normal moral agents bringing maxims of grossly immoral acts to

---

[869] Barbara Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 145.
[870] Barbara Herman, "Morality and Everyday Life," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 74 (November 2000): 31.
[871] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 75.
[872] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment,", 77.
[873] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment,", 77.

the CI procedure routinely, only to discover (to their surprise?) that these acts are forbidden."[874]

Otherwise put, RMS indicate a "deliberative presumption" against certain kinds of action.[875] It is in

virtue of being an act of 'betrayal,' for instance, that we must deliberate about whether giving our

friend up for some reason is a good reason. The concept of betrayal raises the question of whether

acting in a certain way is wrong. In virtue of the general reliability of RMS in properly guiding our

moral thinking, they instill what Herman calls a kind of "moral confidence."[876] We don't need to

always ask whether what we are doing is morally right because our RMS can alert a moral agent to

"moral danger."[877] Herman writes, "We have a moral agent recognizing a need to deliberate when the

action or policy she would pursue is flagged by deliberative principles *and* she believes her reasons for

action are such as to rebut the presumptions against the kind of action she intends."[878]

All of this requires a baseline confidence in our internalized moral norms. These can, of

course, fail us and become, in Herman's words, a source of "moral hazard."[879] Nevertheless, the

point is structural. Even where internalized moral norms have been corrupted, it doesn't eliminate

our everyday reliance on them but rather highlights our need to be able to assume a critical stance

toward them. Herman deals with this by recognizing two levels of potential moral failure within the

Kantian system: moral perception (RMS) and/or moral assessment (CI).[880] Our ordinary moral

categories may need to be revised or enriched, but the CI procedure is still dependent on them.

Two mechanisms, her reading of 'maxims' and her concept of "rules of moral salience,"

enable Herman's theory to incorporate languages of the good at the level of everyday moral

---

[874] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment,", 76.

[875] She writes, "Morality (a moral culture) educates agents in a moral language, using rules of moral salience. These rules instruct about the sorts of actions that need moral justification and the sorts of circumstances to which morality requires response...For the purposes of moral *deliberation*, these rules need to establish not just salience but also a deliberative presumption for justifying reasons. Prior to deliberation the agent must *both* identify her proposed action as of a particular moral kind (this sets the deliberative presumption) and determine the nature of her interest in the action (or its end) that is to ground a possible rebuttal of the presumption." Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," in *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 151.

[876] Herman, "Morality and Everyday Life," 36-37. Confidence, as she notes, has both individual/psychological and social/institutional components.

[877] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 78.

[878] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 152.

[879] Herman, "Morality and Everyday Life," 31.

[880] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 89-90.

judgment. Given the starting point of a situated agent's undertakings, Kantian moral theory builds in space for a wide range of substantive ethical concepts. Rather than pitting substantive ethical interpretation against procedure as Taylor sometimes does, Herman's neo-Kantianism synthesizes substance and procedure through her conception of the rules of moral salience that feed content to maxims. Herman shows how the internal logic of Kantian moral theory necessarily draws on the thick ethical understanding available in a moral agent's social world. Herman's device of the RMS shows how Kantian moral theory, often thought to suffer from a fatal lack of content, can have far more resources at its disposal than frequently thought. Taylor's criticism that modern moral theory reduces moral thinking to a single issue fails to apply to at least the level of moral judgment in Herman's theory.[881] But these substantial moral notions operate within an architectonic governed by the categorical imperative. Is this simply a Kantian parallel to the intuitive/critical level distinction found in Hare's theory or is there a deeper connection to the good available?

## 6.3.2 The Categorical Imperative Reconsidered

In contrast to fellow neo-Kantian formalists like Hare and Habermas, who restrict themselves to versions of the universalization test, a prevailing theme in Herman's work is the claim that by tapping into the various formulations of the categorical imperative we discover resources for constructing a more robust Kantian theory. She challenges the idea that the categorical imperative is a mere decision procedure by reminding us that the universalization test, often the only formulation of the categorical imperative used by contemporary theorists, is only one version of the categorical imperative among many.[882] Herman stresses that the different formulations of the categorical imperative must be read together as mutually supporting elements in one overarching position. Her

---

[881] He frequently refers to such theories as "single-term moralities." See, for instance, Taylor, "Modern Moral Rationalism," 63, 65, 72, 75. For another excellent Kantian response to the charge of being hopelessly procedural or rule-based, specifically MacIntyre's formulation of the argument, see Onora O'neill, "Kant after Virtue," *Inquiry* 26 (December 1983): 387-405.

[882] Cf. Thomas Scanlon's remark, "The Categorical Imperative is more plausibly seen as the centrepiece of a philosophical account of morality than as a principle which is intended to serve as a mechanism for making moral decision without the aid of intuitive judgment." T.M. Scanlon, "The Aims and Authority of Moral Theory," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 11.

attempt to articulate a more humane conception of Kantian deliberation draws, on the additional

resources supplied by the other formulations.[883]

The additional formulations of the CI help Herman remedy and address the inadequacies of

the universalization test taken in isolation. Universalization tests (u-tests) don't run themselves for

the reason that we need a criterion for determining whether or not a given act can be universalized or

not.[884] This leads Herman to the position that u-tests inevitably deploy a theory of value, implicit or

explicit. She writes: "the argument of a universalization test directly or indirectly introduces a theory's

conception of value into its procedures of judgment. For the argument of a universalization test to

produce determinate moral results, it must reveal something that matters."[885] What this reveals is that

a Kantian morality cannot be properly understood as simply the utilization of a u-test. We cannot get

away from a broader conception of value.

This point is connected to Herman's solution to the problem of the normative force of

moral rules. A moral theory that sees Kantian moral deliberation as simply the application of a

universalization test or the derivation of a set of moral rules from such a u-test runs into the problem

that it cannot explain why it is important to follow those moral rules, and as a consequence makes it

difficult for agents to understand how morality fits into the whole of deliberative life.[886] The problem

with such an approach to moral theory, according to Herman, is that they lack a conception of value:

"Without a theory of value, the rationale for moral constraint is a mystery."[887] Herman thus touches

on the concern driving Taylor's critique of modern moral inarticulacy—namely, that contemporary

---

[883] These lines of argument are advanced primarily in Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," and "Leaving Deontology Behind."

[884] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 153.

[885] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 153.

[886] Refuting this picture is Herman's aim in "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties." She writes, "one of the failings of traditional deontology is in the fact that it fails to give a reason or rationale for moral constraint. The absence of a rationale is significant for two connected reasons. First, a rationale renders moral action intelligible to the moral agent, making possible the reasoned integration of morality into one's system of ends and commitments. Second, it introduces a framework for reasoned deliberation necessary to the stable resolution of morally complex situations. A grounding conception of value could provide this rationale by offering an explanation of the wrong- or right-making characteristics of action that renders moral requirements intelligible in a way that is then able to guide deliberation." Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 216.

[887] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 210.

moral theories lack the ability to express why it is important to act rightly.[888] Kantian moral theory, if

it is to successfully give an account of the underlying reason for why we should obey the rulings of

the categorical imperative, requires that we situate it within a broader conception of value.

Herman reminds us that Kant's *Groundwork* starts as an account of the good—specifically,

the unconditional goodness of 'the good will.' Kant's elaboration of the principles of practical

rationality, she maintains, are an articulation of this theory of the good will. The categorical

imperative thus expresses the goodness of the good will. We need to think of the constraints of

practical rationality not as arbitrary constraints on the good but rather as an expression of what

constitutes it.[889] She writes, "Although principles of right constrain our pursuit of particular

conceptions of the good, this does not amount to the absolute 'priority of the right' in the canonical

sense. Kant's project in ethics is to provide a correct analysis of 'the Good' understood as the

ultimate determining ground of all action."[890] The theory of value emerges, according to Herman,

from the other, often ignored, formulations of the categorical imperative, and this theory of value

serves as the fundamental orientation point for the categorical imperative's u-test.[891] We thus find a

division of labor among the various formulations of the categorical imperative. While the u-test

provides a criterion for testing a proposed undertaking, i.e., it tells us *if* it is morally ok, the other

formulations give us the reason *why* acting in a given manner would be morally permissible or

forbidden.[892] The other formulations of the categorical imperative orient the u-test by supplying an

account of value. Herman writes:

---

[888] For this line of criticism see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3. This point is discussed at length in chapter 4.

[889] This is the driving thought behind Herman's essay "Leaving Deontology Behind."

[890] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 210. Herman gives the following breakdown of Kant's linking of the good will with practical rationality: "Two things follow from locating unconditioned goodness in the good will: (1) the goodness of the good will is in its willing, not in the effects it brings about, and (2) the goodness in willing derives from the relation of the will (through its principle) to practical reason." Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 213.

[891] See Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 224-230, 236-240.

[892] Herman writes: "The Formula of Universal Law shows that a maxim of deception [for example] is impermissible; the Formulas of Humanity and Autonomy explain why it is not good. The Formula of Universal Law can function alone, but it needs interpretation to make its results didactic. The Formula of Humanity provides interpretation, but it cannot function alone. It is only *after* we know that a maxim is impermissible (because it does not have the form of universal lawgiving) that we can ask how, in that maxim, we fail to treat rational nature as an end." Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 230.

the argument of the CI procedure invokes rational agency as a value constraint: the value of rational agency is to be expressed in the commitment to refrain from adopting principles that are not possible for all others of one's (rational) kind. Positively, each must view her maxims as candidates for principles that could constitute a community of free and equal persons. That is why universalization matters.[893]

A fuller account of the categorical imperative reveals something other than a mere procedure. Our self-conception as a rational being in a shared world with other rational beings to whom respect is due expresses in substance what the universalization test expresses in a procedure.[894] Both of these are important for understanding the make-up of the Kantian conception of the good.

Herman clings to the claim, however, that the theory of the good is still strictly speaking a formal claim that is not dependent on the contingencies of an agent's desires, culture, concepts and so on. Rather is a necessary feature of rational agency. She writes, "Reasons supported by material practical principles are contingent: dependent on the desires and interests of particular agents. Purely formal principles, by contrast, are said to give reasons that are necessary and universally valid, reasons that hold in virtue of features that are constitutive of our rational natures. Purely formal principles do not have *no* content; they have *noncontingent* content."[895] The content that Herman takes to spring from a full reading of the categorical imperative is thought to apply to all moral agents in virtue of their rationality.

Herman's re-reading of the categorical imperative enables her to respond to Taylor's criticism that modern moral theory can't explain why following their own moral injunctions matters. Herman acknowledges the standard failure of deontological approaches to adequately articulate why following moral rules matters. This leads to her re-orient Kantian theory around a conception of value that seeks to express the importance of our morality—namely, in a renewed attempt to think about Kantian ethics as an articulation of the good will. In the terms of Taylor's moral philosophy, we might see Herman's theory as a re-articulation of "the constitutive good" driving the Kantian project—namely, the respect owed to rational agents. The explicit status accorded to the value of

---

[893] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 154.
[894] See Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," §§ IV and VI.
[895] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 217.

rational agency thus challenges Taylor's assumption that contemporary neo-Kantianism is necessarily inarticulate by appealing to a notion of the good at a fundamental level.

### 6.3.3 Middle Theory

Herman's approach to the categorical imperative enables her to articulate a theory of value orienting the Kantian project in moral theory. So far we have discussed ordinary moral judgment and Herman's neo-Kantian theory of value. In addition to these she articulates an intermediate body of ethical reflection called "middle theory."[896] The key idea expressed by 'middle theory' is that we can reflect on ethical life in a way that engages with our cultural, historical, and institutional contexts without occurring at the level of a particular, situational judgment. This more general level of moral reflection captured by "middle theory" fills a space between particular judgments made in concrete contexts and higher-order reflections on the ultimate basis for morality. According to Herman, "it lies between the high theory of value and the low theory of applications. Middle theory provides the missing link in a reconstruction of Kantian ethics."[897] Herman draws her inspiration for middle theory from Kantian texts like *The Metaphysics of Morals*.[898] Herman's middle theory counts as an updated version of Kantian anthropology, a level of moral reflection that aims to connect an abstract account of moral obligation with contingent human circumstances. Nevertheless, as she notes, the idea of middle theory itself need not necessarily be Kantian. Moral theories oriented by different conceptions of moral value can still require adaptation to a specific context and hence develop middle theories of their own.[899]

As a mediating body of moral reflection, middle theory contextualizes the Kantian value of rational agency within a particular historical-cultural-institutional context. Kantian theory starts, as we saw above, by examining an agent's willing. The categorical imperative articulates the fundamental

---

[896] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 233-236; Barbara Herman, "Middle Theory and Moral Theory," *Nous* 25 (1991): 183-184.

[897] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 233.

[898] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 232.

[899] Herman, "Middle Theory and Moral Theory," 183.

constraints internal to and constitutive of a good will. In order to assess willing in accordance with

practical reason, however, we require a wide range of empirical knowledge: biological, cultural, and

institutional. Herman writes:

> A middle theory is necessary because what good willing amounts to—for us—is a function
> of, on the one hand, our limited rational and biological capacities, our social and normative
> circumstances, and, on the other, the set of specifically moral constraints on judgment that
> are derived from the value of good willing as expressed in the principle of the Categorical
> imperative. *Middle theory effects the translation of the value of good willing to the circumstances of human
> judgment and deliberation.*[900]

As an attempt to will in ways that respect the dignity of rational agents within a particular context,

middle theory pays attention to "general vulnerabilities" that agents face as well as their "historically

particular situations" that give those more general features a distinctive shape.[901] As Herman puts it,

"General facts that are constitutive of effective rationality will have local variations."[902] The moral

reflection that is needed to understand how our undertakings intersect with a matrix of embedded

meanings and social-political realities falls under Herman's umbrella of middle theory.[903]

Equipped with an understanding of her social world, empirical knowledge of human beings

*qua* biological beings, and the institutional reality within which one acts, middle theory thus offers an

interpretation of how to act in accordance with practical reason in a given context. Herman's model

for middle theory is that of "translation." She writes:

> Middle theory is the theory of the practice of moral judgment. It effects *the translation of the
> basic conception of value in the principles of practical rationality into principles that fit the circumstances of
> human action, judgment, and deliberation.* Because it is responsive to the facts of institutions and
> social organization, middle theory is dynamic: it both shapes and is shaped by practice.[904]

Middle theory provides an interpretation of what an abstract commitment to rationality requires in a

specific historical and cultural setting. The middle theory will thus be a contingent and changing part

of the overall body of moral reflection that makes up a theory. It will include, at this level, the

---

[900] Herman, "Middle Theory and Moral Theory," 184, italics mine.
[901] See Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 233-234, quotes from p. 234.
[902] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 234.
[903] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 234.
[904] Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 236. Italics mine. Or as Herman describes middle theory elsewhere,
it enables "the translation of a formal conception of value into terms suitable to the particular contexts of
human action and deliberation." Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," 240.

contingency, disputability, and need for perpetual vigilance that characterizes interpretive ventures. For Herman, moral reflection characteristic of this level of moral theory is *not a mechanism* but an *act of translation*. Middle theory gives the Kantian theorist a space to theorize without having to assume that her moral concepts have ahistorical or transcultural application. Middle theory expresses the need for moral reflection to perennially link and re-link human agency to specific symbolic and institutional contexts.

Once again, the internal logic of Herman's contextualized Kantianism re-directs us back to thick modes of ethical understanding. Just because the value orienting Kantian morality claims to be universal and ahistorical, it does not follow that our mode of accessing it or our concepts for expressing it must be similarly universal and ahistorical. Herman exploits precisely this logical gap. In order to be true to its own commitments, Kantian theory needs to open itself, on Herman's view, to historically and culturally contingent ethical resources that enable us to deal with the historically and culturally specific threats to rational agency. 'Middle theory' expresses the highest order values of a given moral theory in particular contexts.

### 6.3.4 Kantian Pluralism

Herman's brand of neo-Kantianism boasts a *rapprochement* between a pluralistic view of the moral life and the objectivity of moral value.[905] Within the framework set by the value of rational agency, which provides an objective standard for moral evaluation, a wide range of ethical self-understandings are permitted to flourish. We've already seen two ways in which Herman recovers situated moral content by working out the inner logic of Kantianism. First, the maxim focus of Kantian moral philosophy requires pre-procedural content and starts by assuming the standpoint of the moral agent whose maxim is in question. Herman introduces rules of moral salience as the pre-existing moral content that goes into maxim construction. These substantive evaluative concepts play an inescapable role in navigating life prior to explicit moral deliberation. As Herman puts it, "What is

---

[905] Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," 32.

attractive about introducing RMS into a Kantian theory of moral judgment is that it would seem to let us have it both ways: while morality has an objective foundation, we have good positive reason to tolerate *some* culturally based moral differences."[906] Second, moral deliberation requires us to bridge the value of rational agency and context-bounded action. This means that we need to understand the various ways in which different cultural and institutional structures promote or inhibit the realization of this value. This requires us, according to Herman, to be moral translators. These two ways of injecting thick ethical content within her neo-Kantianism provide Herman the basis for incorporating a pluralistic conception of ethics bounded by an overarching Kantian moral framework.

Herman's distinctive claim is that Kantian ethics can successfully ground a pluralistic conception of ethical life on an objective account of value. In her words, "the Kantian framework provides the reasoned balance between objectivity of judgment and sensitivity to the particular that is necessary to acknowledge pluralism without succumbing to across-the-board relativism."[907] The two aforementioned mechanisms detail how a plurality of ethical self-understandings can be absorbed into her theory while at the same time constraining them by placing them within a framework governed by the value of rational agency. The purportedly objective grounding for a variety of thick ethical self-understandings is in virtue of their connection to the value of rational agency. A moral judgment is objective, according to Herman, if it successfully translates the value of rational agency into a specific situation. Herman writes, "local values can support objective moral judgments only insofar as they are mediated by moral principle (specifically, the categorical imperative). In different Kantian terms: local value has moral standing as it does or can express the value of rational agency."[908] And an action successfully translates the value of rational agency into a concrete context insofar as it is itself in accordance with the value, i.e., the agent's willing is in accordance with the

---

[906] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 92-3.
[907] Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," 32.
[908] Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," 44.

principles of practical rationality.[909] The key point is that this version of neo-Kantianism creates

space for a variety of cultural and institutional forms that still respect the value of rational agency.

But wherein does the objectivity lie? The term 'objectivity' is a slippery one with notoriously

many senses.[910] In defending the claim that neo-Kantianism can successfully bring together ethical

pluralism and objectivity, Herman argues that moral judgments are objective in that maxims,

however diverse, are tested according to "an impartial procedure" that is "universally applied."[911]

What guarantees objectivity is that the standard for maxims doesn't vary: "The same maxims would

always be judged the same way."[912] The objectivity of moral judgment thus is objective in the sense

of an impartial deployment of a procedure. This, she argues, is compatible with a moderate ethical

pluralism.

The categorical imperative thus underwrites, on Herman's view, a variety of ethical positions,

but this may give us a weaker understanding of 'objectivity' than we desire. While this conception of

'objectivity' may give us a universal standard strong enough to rule out some options, it still leaves

moral conflicts behind. Herman writes,

> The Kantian deliberative framework is thereby able to conjoin contingent local institutions
> and principles of judgment in a way that preserves local value without sacrificing objectivity.
> The condition of moral legitimacy of coercive institutions—that they make possible the
> expression of free rational agency—makes it the case that even though moral judgments may
> make sense only within a particular culture, when they are expressions of legitimate
> institutions, local moral judgments can be fully objective. *If this shows that objectivity does not
> require universality, it also explains why objectivity may not be the cure for moral disagreement.*[913]

For those looking for a sense of objectivity that decisively settles ethical disputes, Herman's

conception of objectivity will be too weak. It underdetermines the 'right' thing to do in many

situations. Nevertheless, objectivity so construed facilitates value pluralism by simultaneously

providing a baseline check on the permissibility of various values and permitting a range of ethical

---

[909] See Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind," § II.
[910] For a discussion of the many senses of 'objective' see Joseph Raz, "Notes on Value and Objectivity," in *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 118-160.
[911] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 135.
[912] Herman, "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties," 135.
[913] Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," 43. Italics mine.

expressions within the space opened by the Kantian framework. Multiple forms of life are thus compatible with respect for rational agency.[914]

Our investigation of Barbara Herman's version of neo-Kantianism has vindicated the suspicions that Taylor's portrayal of modern moral philosophy was overly simple. We have seen three ways in which the good is incorporated into Herman's procedural theory: (1) at the level of moral judgment through "rules of moral salience," (2) at the level of "middle theory," and (3) at the highest level of a theory of value emerging from a full reading of the multi-faced categorical imperative. These features are the grounds on which she claims to establish a moderate ethical pluralism within the broader strictures of a Kantian ethic. But there are deeper reasons to doubt whether Herman's theory can satisfactorily articulate the moral life.

### 6.3.5 Rational Agency and Self-Interpreting Animals

Given Herman's characterization of her brand of neo-Kantianism as an attempt to articulate the good will, it may seem like she dodges Taylor's critique altogether. But it is precisely at the meta-level that her position too falls victim to Taylor's critique. We can begin to see the problem in Herman's foundation by asking the following question: what makes rational agency a special or even supreme value on Herman's view? The standard Kantian answer appeals to who and what we are as human beings—namely, rational ones. As Bernard Williams put it, "Kant started from what in his view rational agents essentially *were*."[915] In other words, the authority of morality is grounded on the fundamental Kantian belief that, as Susan Wolf puts it, "one's rational nature is more valuable and more essential to our identity than any other part of us."[916] In his characterization of Kantian ethics,

---

[914] Cf. Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 45n10. He writes, "there is nothing in the idea of a moral theory that excludes pluralism about values, and such charges have little force when directed against theories which recognize a plurality of heterogeneous values, but which hold that, when conflicts of value do arise, there may nevertheless be an answer to the question of what one is required, all things considered, to do."
[915] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 64.
[916] Susan Wolf, "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s., 97 (1997): 312.

Taylor makes a similar point in writing "For Kant we *are* rational agency."[917] On this point Herman is

a surprisingly orthodox Kantian. We ought to act in ways that appropriately respect rational agency

*because* that is who we are. This assumption becomes detectable in her decision to follow Kant in his

notorious claim that our awareness of the categorical imperative is a "Fact of Reason."[918] She

elaborates this assumption as follows:

> It is part of the condition of human agency to be in a community of persons, each of whom is regarded as free on the same grounds we regard ourselves as free: each is seen as capable of forming and acting from a conception of the good, constrained by the Moral Law. The community of agents is in this sense a community of equals. Since to act at all requires some space free from interference, the fact that each has desires, interests, and projects places each in a position to make some claim on the others (at least the minimal claim for some degree of noninterference for permissible projects) and to recognize the point of like claims made by others. *To be a moral agent in a community of equals is to know that you may claim (some) space for your (permissible) pursuits and that you may have to leave space for others'.* This is not a result of any Hobbesian bargaining; *it comes in a Kantian account with the Fact of Reason—that is, with a conception of oneself as a moral agent among others.* It is therefore the conditions of human agency and not the satisfaction of desire that set the object of moral requirement.[919]

In other words, Herman sees Kant's notorious "Fact of Reason" as a basic awareness of oneself as a

moral agent necessarily in relation to other moral agents, i.e., one understands oneself to be one

rational agent among rational others. Using benign language like "the conditions of human agency,"

Herman smuggles in the essentialist premise that we are most essentially rational beings. Her moral

theory thus ultimately rests on a particular ontology of the human. It starts from a particular self-

conception.

But why is *that,* we might ask, our most fundamental identity as agents? The Kantian

conception is certainly a possible moral conception, but why think it is a necessary one? Williams

once asked of Kantian ethics, "Why should I think of myself as a legislator and—since there is no

distinction—at the same time a citizen of a republic governed by these notional laws?"[920] In order to

be successful, Williams added, Kantian ethics "needs to tell us what it is about rational agents that

---

[917] Taylor, "The Motivation Behind a Procedural Ethics," 349. Elsewhere he writes, "Kant, for example, answers it with his concept of a rational being for whom dignity is befitting. As a consquence, his ethics in the final instance refers to a substantialist concept: as we *are* rational beings, we should act in line with this, as it is our nature. We should respect reason both in ourselves and in others." Taylor, "Language and Society," 30.

[918] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 85-6.

[919] Herman, "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 86, italics mine.

[920] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 63

requires them to form this conception of themselves as, so to speak, abstract citizens."[921] On this point Herman's argument merely begs the question and thus suffers from a similar problem. Herman's claim to derive a minimal moral conception from human agency already builds in from the outset a recognition of the Moral Law as a constraint on legitimate human action. But this is precisely what the argument is attempting to prove. She doesn't give us additional reasons for why we should conceive of ourselves as one rational agent among others but simply takes this as a brute given.

This points us toward the most fundamental disagreement between Herman and Taylor—namely, how we conceive of human agency. Both thinkers advance accounts of the universal structure of moral agency that impact how we think of the content of ethical life. For Taylor we are most fundamentally "self-interpreting animals," i.e., beings whose self-articulations shape, at least to some degree, who we are as beings. We cannot be properly understood without reference to our capacity for articulation and the interpretations that flow from that capacity. Herman, by contrast, toes the standard Kantian line in holding that we are essentially autonomous, rational agents. As she puts it, "The hero of Kantian narrative has a conception of herself as an autonomous agent among others."[922] We might say that the most fundamental difference between Taylor and Herman turns on whether moral agency at its deepest level is understood in terms of our rationality or our capacity for self-interpretation.

One way to render this difference visible is to ask *where interpretation occurs* in these two theories. As we have seen in the above discussion, interpretation plays a substantial role in Herman's theory. Indeed, Herman's greatest service to the Kantian tradition is perhaps showing the unavoidable centrality of interpretation to Kantian moral theory, specifically its account of moral judgment. Properly respecting the rationality of other moral agents requires, as we saw earlier, "translation" into given institutional contexts and shared meanings. Not only are a plurality of forms of life compatible with and occur within this broader Kantian ethical framework, but it is, according to Herman, even a duty to be open to others and form ever more inclusive, cosmopolitan

---

[921] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 63.
[922] Herman, "Obligation and Performance," 181.

"communities of moral judgment."[923] The key point is that interpretation always remains beholden to the Kantian conception of moral agents as fundamentally rational agents, and rational agency counts as the thing of greatest worth. On this account, rational agency is the uninterpreted frame within which interpretations occur.

By contrast, Taylor's view of human agency stresses from the outset the centrality of interpretation. He sees us, after all, as fundamentally "self-interpreting animals." Placed within the self-interpreting animals framework, we can re-encounter the Kantian self-conception as itself an articulation of the good. It can re-appear, in other words, as itself an articulation or an interpretation of human life.[924] This flips Herman's position on its head. Rather than the interpretation occurring within the Kantian framework of rational agency, the value of rationality is seen as a possible articulation within the broader hermeneutical framework established by our identity *qua* self-articulating animals. From this perspective, the Kantian conception of moral agency is re-conceived as a powerful modern strand of self-interpretation but not an essential one. It is not a given that we simply are moral agents or that we should care above all about this feature of ourselves.

While both thinkers attempt to outline a universal structure for human agency, Taylor's account of moral agency is *thinner* and consequently *broader* than Herman's account. It is thinner because it builds less specific content into the self and thus also broader because its focus on the capacity for self-interpretation allows for a wider range of possible self-understandings. The Kantian self-conception, by contrast, doesn't see itself as a contingent historical product, as a self-articulation competing in the space of rival interpretations. It doesn't, in other words, see itself as a conception disclosed through acts of articulation. This meta-level self-understanding makes a difference.

Placing the Kantian position within Taylor's broader hermeneutical meta-framework transforms the Kantian position in fundamental ways. By re-imagining her theory as itself a mode of

---

[923] See Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment," and "A Cosmopolitan Kingdom of Ends."

[924] For the idea that moral theories are expressions of underlying moral traditions see also Mark Johnson, *The Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 64. He refers us to Alasdair MacIntre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 268.

articulation, albeit a technically sophisticated one, the grounds on which we debate have shifted. The criterion within Taylor's meta-framework is that of articulacy, i.e., how well does a theory express what matters to us, what moves us. But this renders the grounding of even neo-Kantian approaches contingent as they emerge as interpretations grounded in moral feeling. Rather than describing our essential nature as rational beings, glossing the Kantian view as an articulation places it within an arena of various substantive articulations that attempt to give voice to our feelings of the significance of morality. We are thus forced to re-envision what Kantian moral theory is doing. It remains an open question whether such a moral theory will succeed as a competitor within this new theoretical environment.

## 6.4 From Decision Procedures to Deliberative Frameworks

Having discussed the work of Herman and Hare at length, I want to step back and consider the shape of modern moral theories in more general terms. Critics of contemporary moral philosophy tend to work with a certain picture of moral theory as a system of general rules.[925] They commonly identify it with a "decision procedure," a term that, as Robert Louden has remarked, counts among "the favorite terms of abuse among antitheorists."[926] This conception of moral theory sees the ultimate destination for philosophical reflection as a simple, unifying formula or algorithm for moral decision-making. In a word, it strives to produce, in Annette Baier's phrase, "a ready reckoner."[927] The principle of utility and the categorical imperative are commonly seen to epitomize this ambition.

While Taylor's critique of modern moral theory draws on a more sophisticated conception of moral agency, a richer account of history, and a deeper diagnosis of the maladies behind present

---

[925] For a list of features of the anti-theory conception of 'theory' see Robert Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), Introduction and chapter 5; for another helpful list of the common features of anti-theory see Martha Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 232-236.

[926] Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*, 92.

[927] Annette Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices," in *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 226.

day reductionistic theories than his fellow critics, his conception of theory itself looks remarkably like that of other anti-theorists. Recall Taylor's characterization of modern moral theory quoted at the outset of this project: "The central task of moral philosophy is to account for what generates the obligations that hold for us. A satisfactory moral theory is generally thought to be one that defines some criterion or procedure which will allow us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do."[928] This is the kind of approach to moral thinking that results from a "proceduralist" conception of practical reasoning. Separating the right from the good makes possible the conception of morality as the kind of thing that could be captured by a decision procedure. Most recently, Taylor has described contemporary moral thinking as suffering from "code-fetishism," which he defines as "the identification of morality with a unified code, generated from a single source."[929] Here again, modern moral theory is equated with the project of inventing an equation for moral-practical deliberation.

Defenders of modern moral theory have resisted anti-theorists on precisely this point. Moral theory's defenders commonly complain that critics operate with a misconception of *what* moral theory is. Anti-theorists are attacking a strawperson.[930] The promoters of traditional moral theory stake their ground on the claim that the anti-theorist's picture of moral theory misrepresents the theoretical enterprise, and thus their critiques miss the mark. By showing anti-theorist criticisms to rest on a false conception of moral theory, such defenders hope to vindicate moral theory.

While the actual shape of the responses to anti-theory vary depending on how an individual theory-defender frames the issues, we can discern two interesting lines of response among moral theory's promoters that bear on our discussion. On the one hand, moral theory is *more* than simply a decision procedure. Moral theory goes beyond decision procedures by orienting moral thinking towards an end. It explains why we should take moral rules or decision procedures seriously. Martha

---

[928] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 70.

[929] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007), 704.

[930] This line of argument assumes a wide variety of forms, depending on where the misconception of theory is located. Broadly speaking, examples of this general line of response include: Stanley G. Clarke, "Anti-Theory in Ethics" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (July 1987): 237-244; Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*; Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," 227-255; Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), chapter 3; James D. Wallace, "Theorizing about Morals," *Nous* Vol. 25 (1991), 176-183.

Nussbaum writes, "theory is not obtuse in the way that systems of laws can frequently be obtuse: by turning to theory, which gives us *the point and purpose of rules*, we learn when we may diverge from them."[931] Identifying theory with a set of rules or a decision procedure thus misses out on precisely the critical character of moral theory. To criticize a decision procedure for being senseless misplaces the argument. As Nussbaum puts it, "theory enables us to understand the limitation of general rules in ways we could not otherwise, therefore to correct the deficiencies inherent in any system of rules. Thus criticism of systems of rules need not entail criticism of ethical theory, and can in fact give us reasons for turning to an ethical theory."[932] Samuel Scheffler expresses a similar idea when he describes moral theory as "a scheme of moral salience."[933] His point here is that "moral theories embody competing proposals about the types of features that are morally salient, and about the nature of the priority relations among different types of salient features."[934] So understood, a moral theory functions as an evaluative lens for picking out what is morally important. A moral theory expresses a standpoint of value, a point made explicit in Herman's version of neo-Kantianism. Even granting the assumption that moral theories involve something like an algorithm for moral deliberation, if Nussbaum and Scheffler are right, a theory transcends it by explaining *why* moral rules, principles, or decision procedures matter. This poses a direct challenge to Taylor's argument that modern moral theories don't have the resources to explain the normative force of their injunctions.

On the other hand, moral theory can also be *less* than a decision procedure. As Samuel Scheffler argues with great sophistication, a moral theorist is neither committed to the explicit deployment of formula in moral deliberation nor "the in-principle availability of a moral decision procedure."[935] He cites ways in which moral theory diverges from the idea of a deliberative formula,

---

[931] Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," 239, italics mine.
[932] Nussbaum, "Why Practice needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour," 231.
[933] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 51.
[934] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 51.
[935] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 42.

i.e., a decision procedure.[936] For starters, even if we accept the idea of a decision procedure as an adequate guide for picking our morally right action, it doesn't follow that using it is a good idea. As Scheffler notes, "a decision procedure may be cumbersome, inefficient, time-consuming, or in other ways ill suited to the circumstances."[937] Such reflections led R.M. Hare, as we saw, to introduce the distinction between the "intuitive level" and the "critical level" of moral thought.[938] Similarly, David Brink has similarly argued that the principle of utility should be understood as a "standard or criterion of rightness" rather than a decision procedure for conscious employment in deliberation.[939] While this kind of strategy is common among utilitarians, even some Kantians adopt this strategy. Barbara Herman's distinction between "moral judgment" and explicit "moral deliberation" addresses this concern. These examples reveal a tendency across the utilitarian-Kantian divide to create a space between the fundamental principle of a moral theory and the deliberative activities of a moral agent. If a decision procedure exists at all within the confines of a theory, it doesn't necessarily occupy a moral agent's conscious life. Reasonable theories don't place unreasonable demands on the deliberations of moral agents. Otherwise put, even if a moral theory stipulates a moral test, we need not always be taking tests. Moral theory doesn't require agents to apply, deploy, or even consult a decision procedure in real-time moral deliberation.[940]

Even if a moral theory need not dictate the terms of an agent's moral deliberation, doesn't it require at least "in principle" the existence of a decision procedure? That is to say, wouldn't it still stipulate, to borrow Brink's language, a "criterion" for morally right action? The answer is 'no'

---

[936] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 42-48.
[937] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 46.
[938] As we discussed in § 6.2.2.
[939] Brink, "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View," 421. He writes, "A standard or criterion of rightness explains what makes an action or motive right or justified; a decision procedure provides a method of deliberation." We find a similar point in Peter Railton's distinction between "subjective consequentialism" and "objective consequentialism." See Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality."
[940] As Scheffler has argued convincingly, the way in which so-called "moral considerations" bear on an agent's moral deliberation is itself open to many different variations—from consciously using moral concepts in one's deliberation, to having quasi-automatic responses to morally relevant facts without ever stopping to deliberate at all. He concludes that we can make no general claims about what must or must not be going on in the mind of a moral agent in her practical deliberations in order to be, say, a 'morally good' person. See Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 30-38.

according to Scheffler. In order to understand this response, we need to understand what he means

by 'decision procedure.' He writes:

> if there were in fact an acceptable moral theory, and if one had full knowledge of its
> principles, and if one also had full knowledge of the relevant information pertaining to any
> particular action, and if, further, one perceived each bit of this relevant information *as*
> relevant, *then* there would also be a mechanical sequence of operations one could perform in
> order to arrive at an overall moral verdict about the action in question.[941]

The very notion of a decision procedure as Scheffler glosses it requires completeness, i.e.., given

sufficient inputs, we'd necessarily reach a correct output in terms of moral deliberation. So

understood, Scheffler thinks that moral theories need not adopt an in principle decision procedure

because theories can admit the incomplete nature of moral thinking.[942] In other words, moral theory

can structure our deliberation by highlighting "salient" features without having an answer, as it were,

for every moral question.[943]

Scheffler adds that a decision procedure, so conceived, would not in itself guarantee

deliberative success because it still requires adequate information and perception on the agent's part.

Simply put, the theory can only generate the right deliberative outputs, granted sufficient inputs.

These inputs, Scheffler argues, include both information regarding the agent's situation, a full handle

on the relevant moral features of the situation, and adequate perception of the morally relevant

aspects of her context. This gives us reason to think that moral theory not only is compatible with

but also requires "the faculties of moral sensitivity, perception, imagination, and judgment."[944]

The above discussion has crystallized two ways in which moral theory as understood by its

defenders defies the picture of moral theory as presented by anti-theorists. First, moral theory goes

beyond being a mere decision procedure by organizing them around a conception of value. The

---

[941] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 42.
[942] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 47-48. He writes, "someone can accept the idea of a moral theory, understood as a system of general principles for the moral evaluation of action, without believing that there must be a determinate overall verdict for every single act, let alone that there is a mechanical routine guaranteed in every instance to lead us to it" (48).
[943] A good example of this kind of approach comes from Thomas Scanlon's moral theory, which attempts to consolidate moral thinking around the contractualist principle of "reasonable rejection" but provides no exhaustive method for deliberation. See T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998), especially chapter 4.
[944] Scheffler, *Human Morality*, 43.

theory picks out what is "salient" (Scheffler) to moral thinking and explains the "point" (Nussbaum) of the moral injunctions it recognizes. That is to say, it constitutes a normative perspective that cannot be reduced to merely a formula for moral thinking. It transcends and thereby orients whatever moral rules or injunctions are included in the theory. Second, following Scheffler's arguments, a moral theory neither requires the use of a decision procedure in moral deliberation nor the "in-principle availability" of a comprehensive criterion for selecting morally right action. I will distinguish between *deliberative frameworks* and *decision procedures* in order to mark the contrast between the picture of theory presented by anti-theorists and the above picture of theory presented by some of theory's most articulate defenders.[945] By 'decision procedure' I mean to capture the picture of moral theory as exhaustible by a formula for moral deliberation, even if it serves merely as a standard for right action rather than a formula for conscious deliberation. This view assumes that procedures are typically too dumb and narrowly conceived to give space to the wide range of deliberative considerations that factor into everyday living. By contrast, I use the phrase 'deliberative frameworks' to express the more subtle view of theory defended by thinkers like Nussbaum and Scheffler. Two key features mark deliberative frameworks. First, theory, so understood, operates with a fundamental normative conception that establishes the rationale of moral injunctions. The framework supplies reasons for why moral rules are important, i.e., it tells us "the point" of them. Second, theory on the deliberative framework model has a less rigid connection between fundamental moral principles and practical deliberation. Above all, it abandons the idea that moral theory must produce an algorithm for moral decision-making as well as the idea that moral theory must supply us with an unambiguous criterion for moral assessment, even if it is not meant for use in explicit deliberation. Deliberative frameworks display the virtues of moral theory touted in the writings of Nussbaum and Scheffler.

---

[945] The language of "deliberative frameworks" is drawn from and inspired by theorists like Scanlon and Herman. In Herman's writing, she explicitly uses the phrase "deliberative framework." See Barbara Herman, "Pluralism and the Community of Moral Judgment" in *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 43. Scanlon speaks of contractualism as "a unified moral framework." See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other,* 216.

If the theory-defenders are correct that moral theories are better understood as deliberative frameworks, it calls into question Taylor's assumption regarding the shape of contemporary moral theories. Indeed, this reconceptualization of moral theory appears to be a head-on confrontation with Taylor's charge that proceduralism cannot express "point" of obeying moral rules.[946] Indeed, Nussbaum even uses very similar language in her defense of moral theory. On her view, far from being mere formulae, moral theories embody enough of an evaluative perspective to express "the point" behind our moral injunctions. Is this enough to undercut Taylor's critique? To what extent does Taylor's critique rely on the untenable identification of moral theory with a mere decision procedure? Does his critique still pose a challenge to modern moral philosophy once we recognize moral theories as deliberative frameworks rather than decision procedures or "ready reckoners"?

## 6.5 General Lessons

Taylor's critique of modern moral philosophy rests on the assumption that contemporary proceduralist theories have no place for the good. Once moral reflection contracts to solely focusing on right action, it becomes conceivable to specify a criterion for determining which actions are morally permissible, prohibited, and/or required, i.e., the decision procedure model. This conception of moral theory has been challenged on multiple fronts. Some of Taylor's critics point to strong evaluations and qualitative distinctions within procedural moral theories. They suggest that modern moral theories actually drawn more substantially on the good than Taylor assumes. Moreover, the assumption that modern moral theories aim to give us a decision procedure has been called into question by several of theory's defenders. I have summarized their critiques under the heading of 'deliberative frameworks.' This phrase is meant to express that (a) moral theories orient our moral principles through a conception of moral value and (b) that decision procedures need not be involved.

---

[946] See, for instance, Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 89.

In an attempt to avoid speaking in rough generalities or discussing rival strawpersons, we have investigated in detail how conceptions of the good can be at work within two prominent representatives of the Kantian and utilitarian traditions. The results of our investigation substantiate the charges made against Taylor (and anti-theorists in general) that his conception of moral theory is far too limited. The theories of both Hare and Herman count as examples of the deliberative framework conception of theory rather than the decision procedure conception of theory. This suggests that procedural moral theories may not get tagged by the more superficial aspects of Taylor (and other anti-theorist's) criticisms.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest that despite the more nuanced conception of moral theory as deliberative frameworks, Taylor's critique is still relevant. In closing, I want to note a few general lessons we can draw from this examination of the shape(s) of contemporary proceduralism. First, Hare's theory exemplifies a tendency to want to distance moral theory from moral intuitions and thereby distance his theory from a substantive conception of the good. He does this for the sake of achieving an impartial standpoint, itself a moral value, the theory claims to be merely in a "double harness" of logic and facts, both of which would be apparently neutral as far as conceptions of the good go.[947] This kind of explicit dissociation from a conception of the good falls into inarticulacy in two senses on Taylor's critique: (1) it cannot give an account of the *moral* reason to take the theory seriously and (2) it isn't true to its own peculiarly moral inspiration. These are two basic senses of Taylor's description of contemporary theory as "inarticulate." Taylor's insight is that any articulate approach to ethical thinking will have to have a conception of the good in order to get at the peculiarly *moral* force of implied by the moral theory.[948] This is the most straightforward application of his critique to the contemporary philosophical scene. Those theorists who think they can ground

---

[947] Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 5

[948] On Taylor's view, the only reason this move is plausible is because the moral viewpoint that does the actual supporting is so strongly entrenched. This creates the illusion that we can rest a moral theory on simply formal, procedural considerations. Contemporary theories, in his words, "look like formal principles only because they are so foundational to the moral thinking of our civilization. We should strive to formulate the underlying moral insights just as clearly and expressedly as we do all others." See Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 231-233, quote from p. 233.

their theory in something other than an account of the good, i.e., a *neutral* conception of rationality, fall within the purview of Taylor's attack. That such a prominent theorist like Hare bites this bullet testifies to the relevance of this critique.

Second, even the shift from moral theory *qua* decision procedure to moral theory *qua* deliberative framework does not immunize moral theory from Taylor's criticism of its "drive towards unification" in moral domain.[949] Even deliberative frameworks tend to "unify" the moral domain around a singular principle. Even if we accept that moral theories need not incorporate a "decision procedure" in Scheffler's technical sense, i.e., as offering a complete set of answers given sufficient inputs, this still does not automatically exonerate theory from falsely unifying moral thinking. Theories may not be incomplete in Scheffler's sense of not fully specifying the while still at the same time being responsible for a "breathtaking systematization" of the ethical.[950] Our examinations of Hare of Herman bare out this point that even deliberative frameworks can still invest a singular highest-order principle with ultimate authority as far as morality goes, even if this is understood as not entailing a complete set of answers to all possible moral questions.

Moreover, even when it comes to the place of the good in moral theory, contemporary procedural theories come up short. For starters, consider how Hare sought to incorporate our various substantive ethical notions within the confines of a larger procedural moral theory. The problem exposed by Williams's critique of Hare is that we can introduce troubling rifts into our moral thinking if we subsume the thick concepts through which we live our lives under a higher order principle that views them merely instrumentally. In other words, we have to recognize the plurality of values that issue demands on us, and we cannot attempt to reconcile these notions by appeal to two levels, as we find in Hare. Nevertheless, this doesn't rule out higher-order principles as such, as Herman's theory demonstrates, but only those that require an agent adopt two opposing perspectives towards her own evaluative categories. Herman's theory saw the categorical imperative

---

[949] Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, eds. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), 149.

[950] Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," 149.

as a test of minimal permissibility. It doesn't require that we see our lower level thick concepts as trying to maximize the value of rationality. Rather her theory simply requires that our various ways of schematizing situations and interpreting ourselves be compatible with the higher level value of living in a community of rational agents, a principle that is expressed, she argues, in the universalization test. The general lesson here is that "transparency" (Williams) or "articulacy" (Taylor) requires that we be able to relate to our deepest values in a straightforward way. Moral theories that re-interpret our moral experience in terms that we cannot recognize in our participation in our ethical lifeworld bring about inarticulacy, even though on the face of it they salvage the qualitative distinctions in terms of which we feel, reason, and live.

The issue concerning the place of the good in modern moral philosophy runs even deeper in Taylor's critique. The issue isn't just that procedural theories utilize decision procedures with no reference to "qualitative distinctions" nor is it that filtering them through a two-level architecture mangles such concepts as we saw in Hare's case. The issue also isn't that moral theories fail to "have a place for notions of the good life," but rather that procedural theories "foreshorten the scope of moral philosophy, pay risibly little attention to the good, and concentrate largely on the principles by which we can determine the right."[951] Taylor's comments here are on the surface perplexing. Whatever "place for notions of the good life" his opponents have are apparently compatible with giving "risibly little attention to the good." This points us to the deeper sense of "the good" intended by Taylo. Some moral theories may recognize a space for individuals to pursue to the good life within a moral framework, but these theories fail to see the moral theory as itself a view of the good understood in the fairly expansive sense outlined in chapter four. This interpretation is reinforced by Taylor's further remark concerning his use of the notion of "the good":

> the thing to recognize is that I am talking here of the good in a different sense…I distinguish 'life goods', that is, the kinds of thing which are captured in notions of the good life, on one hand, from 'constitutive goods' on the other. By this I mean features of the universe, or

---

[951] He writes, "most of the proceduralists I am attacking have a place for notions of the good life…My grievance against them is that they foreshorten the scope of moral philosophy, pay risibly little attention to the good, and concentrate largely on the principles by which we can determine the right." Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 243.

> God, or human beings, (i) on which the life goods depend, (ii) which command our moral awe or allegiance, and (iii) the contemplation of or contact with which empowers us to be good…constitutive goods are rather weird and exotic animals from the standpoint of mainstream moral philosophy, and the idea that moral philosophy ought to deal with them is way beyond the event horizon of most contemporary authors in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is this for which I saw 'no conceptual space' in current theorizing.[952]

Taylor's charge then is that contemporary theories have little awareness of the life goods and constitutive goods presupposed by their theories. Moral "inarticulacy" thus involves a lack of awareness concerning these two dimensions of the good and how they bear upon one's moral thinking.

But is it true that contemporary theory neglects "the good" understood in this deeper way? On the one hand, Hare's theory is a good example of a contemporary moral theory with no conception of life goods or constitutive goods. This is bound up with his attempt to ground theory on a neutral conception of rationality. Moreover, nothing in the notion of a deliberative framework guarantees that moral theories have a full-blown conception of life goods or constitutive goods. They merely require some kind of orienting evaluative notion that explains why the moral rules matter. So it seems as if some contemporary theories are guilty as charged as far as this attack goes. On the other hand, however, our investigation into Herman's neo-Kantianism showed an awareness of these two dimensions of the moral life. Her conception of neo-Kantianism doesn't attempt to pin morality to neutral principles of logic or transcendental argumentation, but rather rests explicitly on a conception of the highest good—namely, that of rational agency—that gets at a fundamental feature of our agency, i.e., what we are. Does this show that contemporary theory is more "articulate" than Taylor assumes?

Even if Herman's theory is grappling with the kind of deeper issues that Taylor wants to raise, it runs into a deeper problem revealed in Herman's own facile ontology. On her view, moral agents are aware of the Kantian moral law because it is a feature of human agency. Her theory of the good rests on the claim that we are "moral agent[s] in a community of equals" that are "constrained by the Moral Law." But this point is taken as itself uncontroversial. When we ask, however, as

---

[952] Taylor, "Comments and Replies," 243.

Williams does, why a moral agent should self-consciously adopt this self-interpretation above all else, this position begins to rattle. It exposes the forgotten hermeneutical moment passed over in Herman's account. It reveals how our self-conception *qua* rational agents isn't simply a given but is itself a particular, contentful self-interpretation. In taking this to be a *merely structural* feature of human agency, Herman thus fails to recognize the way in which this conception of ourselves emerges within history as itself a product of articulation.[953] Here Williams's line of argument converges with that of Taylor. The former asks us why we ought to interpret ourselves in Kantian terms, while the latter furnishes us with the broader hermeneutical framework revealing the Kantian position as one possible mode of self-constitution among others. The problem with Herman's theory is that it simply takes for granted what we are *qua* moral agents and doesn't provide us with a further argument at the level of self-interpretation.

Now it may turn out that the Kantian view can provide a superior account of our self-understanding. Nevertheless, Herman's position not only lacks an argument in favor of the Kantian mode of self-understanding, but it even appears to lack an awareness that an argument at this level is necessary. This points to the most radical feature of Taylor's critique, a feature that extends the range of Taylor's attack on contemporary theory. His hermeneutical meta-framework impacts the very way in which we hold and defend moral theories. If Taylor is right that we are most fundamentally self-interpreting animals (as we discussed in chapter two) and that practical reasoning cannot but function in a comparative mode between better and worse self-interpretations (as we saw in chapter four), then moral theories must win adherence at the level of providing the best account of our moral experience. Moral theories are disputed in that *qua* articulation, these theories are seen as themselves interpretations of our moral intuitions. Merely formalistic accounts have something like a false consciousness of their own status. As we have seen in our earlier discussion, Taylor's conception of

---

[953] Here we can see a point of connection between Taylor's meta-ethical critique and his thesis that we can only properly understand the modern view of the self in terms of a positive conception that gets *developed* in the emergence of modernity. This point is first suggested in Charles Taylor, "Introduction," *Human Agency and Language,* 4-8. This point was further developed in his large-scale narratives of the origins of modern conception of the 'self' found in *Sources of the Self* and later in *A Secular Age*, especially chapter 15.

moral intuitions neither vouchsafes any particular set of moral intuitions nor remains insulated from corrective perspectives afforded by, among other things, empirical psychological research. It does, however, recognize that moral thinking is deeply enmeshed in and springs from our interpreted moral emotions. The underlying conception of human beings as self-interpreting, moral animals, upon which Taylor's critique is premised, transforms without fanfare the emerging space of ethical dialogue. It requires of moral theories to compete as rival interpretations grounded in our moral emotions. Even if we grant that modern moral theories commonly assume the form of deliberative frameworks rather than decision procedures, the fundamental move of Taylor's critique has been to alter the terrain on which they compete.

**Conclusion**

Modern moral philosophy has come under attack from multiple directions. Some

discontents challenge the production of moral theories; others call into question the authority of

morality; still others encourage us to return to classical modes of ethical thought. This dissertation

has been an extended examination of Charles Taylor's critique of contemporary ethical theory, a

project that intersects with all three of these lines of criticism. I have argued that Taylor's

characterization of our present condition in terms of moral "inarticulacy" is not incidental to his

account. Rather it serves as a useful prism through which to view the whole of his moral philosophy.

On an interpretive level, I have been arguing that the notion of 'articulacy' illuminates how various

strands of Taylor's philosophy intersect and reinforce one another. It has thus served as a useful

hermeneutical tool for showing the relevance of Taylor's "expressivist" philosophy of language, his

"engaged" conception of human agency, his critiques of naturalism and epistemology, as well as his

dialogical conception of practical rationality come to bear on moral philosophy. These resources

unearthed in Taylor's far-flung philosophical pursuits and channeled by his notion of moral

'articulacy' set him apart from his fellow Anglo-American critics.

**I. Articulation and its Implications for Moral Theory**

In order to understand the notion of moral inarticulacy, we had to investigate its root

notion—namely, our capacity for *articulation*. This led us to investigate Taylor's accounts of human

agency and language—specifically, against two backdrops: his critique of naturalism and his critique

of epistemology. What emerged from these criticisms was a positive view of human agency as, on the

one hand, "self-interpreting animals" and on the other hand, "engaged" agents. The former point

emphasizes that any adequate understanding of human beings will have to be through human

meanings and interpretations because these are constitutive of the very kind of thing we are. The

later point revealed an ineliminable foreground/background structure at work in human

understanding. These two strands of thought combine to give us a hermeneutically driven

"philosophical anthropology." Concepts of articulation and articulacy are thus integral to a proper understanding of Taylor's view of what we are like as agents and consequently, the moral life.

The concept of articulation emerging from Taylor's critique of naturalism and epistemology is multi-dimensional. Let me highlight several key features of this concept that are relevant for our understanding of the moral life:

1. *Articulation mediates the background/foreground structure of human understanding.* As embodied, enculturated beings, our implicit understanding far outstrips any explicit formulation of it. A foreground/background structure is the characteristic shape of human understanding. The background is not just the mere accompaniment of representations but more importantly, it is a condition for the very intelligibility of our explicit thoughts. Articulation captures the way in which agents are able to formulate and thereby give expression to this implicit, background awareness of ourselves, our situation, our world.

2. *Articulation can never be completed.* Given that articulation always presupposes a background awareness that far outstrips it, the idea that we could completely articulate our understanding of ourselves and our world is impossible. The task of articulation is thus permanently ongoing. I have called this structural inarticulacy, which stands in contrast to the kind of moral inarticulacy criticized by Taylor.

3. *Articulation occurs in a space between "creation" and "discovery."* Through linguistic expression we are able to formulate our experience, but the act of expression does not leave the material untouched. The act of formulating our experience linguistically adds something to it, so to speak. The concept of articulation captures the duality of the active and passive elements of expression.[954]

4. *Articulation serves as the must fundamental of the "essential contexts" within which we find language meaningful.* Following thinkers like Frege, Wittgenstein, and Brandom, Taylor defends the holism of meaning, i.e. the thesis that a given word, utterance, or text is dependent for its intelligibility upon being situated in a larger context of understanding. The most ultimate frame for sense-making is what Taylor calls the "articulative-disclosive" dimension of language. Language games like moral argumentation take place within a space where things are made accessible through "symbolic forms," a term he borrows from Ernst Cassirer. In brief, articulation is our most fundamental usage of language.

5. *Articulation constitutes who we are as agents.* It is through articulation that we give expression to distinctively human concerns. Articulation is the capacity by which we interpret our emotional responses to situations and pick out those features of our experience that account for why certain responses are appropriate. Articulation is a specific kind of interpretation— namely, concerning distinctively human concerns, i.e., concerns that can only be grasped in and through the meanings constituting our lives. Here self-constitution is bound up with world-constitution in that an agent can only understand herself to be a certain way insofar as she understands her world in a certain light. Self and world count as the two poles between which articulation moves.

---

[954] cf. Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998), 145-163.

These various dimensions of articulation make up the core of Taylor's conception of moral agency.

As with other anti-theorists, how Taylor conceives of ethical life impacts the prospects for moral theory. More specifically, the structural features of human agency falling out of his notion of 'articulation' carry over to the moral life and have significance for how we think moral theory's ambitions. Let me list several of the main way in which it constrains moral theory:

A. *Moral theory isn't self-sufficient.* The background/foreground structure of human understanding carries over to the moral life. That means that our ability to follow moral principles presupposes an implicit moral know-how, which Taylor analogizes to tact. While this dependence in itself doesn't provide a reason to reject theory, contrary to some anti-theorists, it does undermine its stronger claims to authority.

B. *Moral theory is a form of articulation.* Theoretical representations of our moral lives partake of the background/foreground structure. The foreground is put forward as an articulation of the background that can itself settle back into the background as a condition for the intelligibility of other explicit beliefs, principles, and utterances.

C. *Moral theory isn't exclusive.* There are many different media for articulating the moral life from narratives to liturgies. Moral theory thus faces challengers. It is just one of many ways in which we can express the moral life. This poses a challenge to any unique to theory's special authority.

## II. Conditions for Moral Articulacy

Beyond these general implications, Taylor's critique is bound up with the notion of moral articulacy is a more direct way—namely, in his characterization of modern moral theory as fundamentally "inarticulate." On his story, modern moral theory falls into "inarticulacy" by focusing merely on obligatory action. This "narrow" conception of morality treats right action as fundamentally detachable from questions of the good life or of loving the good. Some theorists like Will Kymlicka and Jürgen Habermas entrench this limited conception of the 'moral' by insisting on a "division of labor" within moral theory. Taylor's fundamental claim is that we cannot be "articulate" about the moral life if we fixate solely on obligatory action and embrace the deeper compartmentalization of the ethical life upon which it rests. The good, in short, is a fundamental condition for moral articulacy.

As I read Taylor, his argument against these deeper assumptions governing many mainstream moral theories is to insist on a thesis of ethical holism, i.e., the idea that right action can

only be understood in terms of the whole of ethical life that gives a central place to 'the good.' Moral articulacy requires re-embedding ethical thinking in the good understood in two senses—what I have called the *holism of significance* (the strong reading) and the *holism of deliberation* (the weak reading). The strong reading centers on the thought that in order to appreciate the significance of moral obligations, we must see these through the prism of the good. Here the argument concerns the sense or meaning of morality, which requires reference to the good for its explication. In order to understand why a moral obligation is to be taken seriously, we cannot but rely on substantive ethical categories that express "the point" of obeying a moral rule. These categories in turn have to be located in larger "frameworks" within which an agent lives her life. These in turn require embedding in larger understandings of the world or "pictures of the human predicament," which Taylor calls "constitutive goods." His technical vocabulary expresses the various levels of context needed for grasping the significance of morally obligatory action. These notions spell out the architecture of ethical life. The upshot of Taylor's argument here is that the ethical life is a fundamentally hermeneutical affair. We thus cannot make sense of the meaning or significance of moral obligations without seeing them in terms of the whole, and grasping this whole necessarily brings into play questions of the good.

This line of argument works in conjunction with the weaker reading of ethical holism, which holds that we need to place morality in a broader deliberative context that considers a wide range of goods. This line of argument explains why we cannot simply bracket questions of "all things considered" deliberation, as Habermas wants to do. In other words, the weak reading of ethical holism seeks to demonstrate the necessity of taking up a broader, eudaimonistic conception of practical deliberation, as opposed to the narrow focus on morality characteristic of much of modern moral philosophy. We need to contextualize morality within a picture of a life lead in pursuit of a range of goods, not just morality.

Here we placed Taylor in dialogue with writers like Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, who criticize moral theories for attributing to morality an authority that makes no place for those projects

and attachments that invest life with meaning. These thinkers, like Taylor, want to return us to a eudaimonistic perspective and take an overriding morality to be a threat to a good and meaningful life. Unlike Taylor however they seem to either threaten to downgrade morality's importance in such a way as to eliminate moral constraints on individual projects (Williams) or rely on an underdeveloped concept to the objectivity of meaning to place limits on morality's demotion in the eyes of practical deliberation (Wolf). Taylor's position gives us reason to see practical deliberation in a way that takes into consideration a "plurality of goods" that weigh on a moral agent, including notably those goods that contribute to a meaningful life. But unlike these other two thinkers he sees the problems stemming not from an overly authoritative morality but rather a faulty procedural conception of moral theory. It isn't that morality has been invested with too much authority. Rather, our error is in thinking that 'morality' can be defined by procedure of system of general laws. Morality must be understood in light of the good in the sense that a deliberating agent must ultimately choose between a range of relevant goods. This means we cannot assume, as Kymlicka does, that a "division of labor" can be instituted between morality and the good life. This artificial distinction breaks down under the pressures of practical deliberation. For this reason, ethical thinking must rise to the challenge of addressing the "all things considered" question rather than simply bracketing it, as Habermas suggests. Answering it is necessary for any adequate account of the moral life. Morality must be understood holistically in terms of a life devoted to more than the performance of moral actions. We thus need to contextualize our conception of morality in a eudaimonistic conception of practical deliberation.

As I suggested in chapter five, these two arguments on behalf of ethical holism work together. In an effort to rehabilitate the centrality of judgments of significance, Taylor resurrects the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* within a hermeneutical framework. The problem with procedural moral theories is that they try to stipulate a procedure or principle that is invested with deliberative authority. Such procedures inevitably come unhinged from judgments of ultimate significance. But articulate deliberation must necessarily make judgments regarding importance. Being able to

articulate the value of moral rules, i.e., situate them within the various contexts conferring significance on morality, is essential to seeing morality's place in a range of goods making deliberative demands on us. Seeing morality in terms of the good, in other words, is crucial to appreciating its weight in a broader framework of deliberation oriented around the good.

### III. Toward a More Articulate Conception of Morality

The interpretation of Taylor's moral philosophy defended in this dissertation has stressed a distinction between two phases of Taylor's work: his critique of modern moral philosophy and his articulation of a positive vision of the human good. Making an explicit distinction between these two phases of his writing serves to reconcile several strands of his argument: (1) his emphasis on moral dialogue, (2) his defense of pluralism in ethics (3) his critique of modern moral philosophy, and (4) the religious dimension of his moral thought manifested in his defense the ethical significance of *agape*. The notion of moral articulacy has been instrumental in clarifying this distinction. The first phase can be seen as an attack on the aforementioned constricting assumptions of modern moral philosophy. If successful, this establishes a broader space of ethical thinking in which articulation plays a central role. The second phase of Taylor's argument is the articulation of a certain vision of the human good that emphasizes the importance of a transcendent view of the good. While this dissertation has focused almost exclusively on the former moment in Taylor's ethical thought, it presupposes the success of his critique of procedural moral theory.

While at the level of articulating a "vision of the good" Taylor gestures toward a distinctively Christian ethic, at the level of meta-ethical critique, his arguments push us towards a two-dimensionally pluralistic view of the ethical life. The first dimension captures what we might call *deliberative pluralism*, the idea that within an individual agent's practical deliberation there are various, heterogeneous goods at stake. These goods get mangled by procedural reason, which thinks it can (a) demarcate the 'moral' realm and (b) invest it with unquestionable deliberative authority. The danger of this view has been dramatized in arguments marshaled by Williams and Wolf. Articulacy in

practical deliberation requires recognizing the "plurality of goods" at play in deliberation as well as the centrality of "all things considered" judgments of importance.

Moreover, Taylor's model of practical reasoning stresses its essentially dialogical character. In contrast to a universally applicable procedure, ethical reasoning is seen as essentially a matter of dialogue between parties of different ethical sensibilities. Call this *dialogical pluralism*. Taylor's substantive conception of practical reason is meant to make explicit a common structure amid irreducible ethical difference. He writes, "We have to accept as an *ultimate surd* that people find very different ways to God, or the Good, or Nirvana, ways that seem to involve incompatible assumptions…and yet that these are not simply different destinations, like being clever and being rich, but different attempts to articulate the same call."[955] If Taylor is correct, practical reason is necessarily oriented toward the good, even if the nature of the good in modernity remains deeply contested. As I have been arguing, Taylor's insistence on the "inarticulacy" of moral theory has the upshot of clearing a space for substantive ethical dialogue. Within this space there is room for modern moral theories to be reformulated as articulations of substantive moral intuitions. The space for ethical dialogue remains fragmented and contested, but this meta-stance towards various positions helps us approach the real task of substantive ethical dialogue with greater clarity.

Taylor's moral philosophy, as other commentators have also observed, is a kind of modern Aristotelianism, a hermeneutically inflected neo-Aristotelianism.[956] Our investigation into Taylor's notion of moral "articulacy" has revealed a double sense to this claim: (a) an Aristotelian approach to ethics remains a viable option in modernity and (b) modern moral theories have an avowed ancient structure with both Aristotelian and Platonic moments. Contrary to thinkers like Korsgaard and Habermas who think a classical approach to ethics is closed to us moderns because it presupposes

---

[955] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 2011), 15-16.
[956] Cf. Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 33; Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002), 101.

now defunct metaphysical concepts,[957] Taylor attempts a "retrieval"[958] of the essentials of an Aristotelian ethic by way of a hermeneutical conception of moral agency. It is within the sphere of intersubjectively shared human meanings that Taylor recovers the notion of an "order" that can orient a substantive conception of practical reason. This structure is open to distinctively modern content, i.e., values like "disengaged rationality" and individual freedom. Indeed, much of Taylor's historical work is devoted to revealing the positive "visions of the good" that undergird modern moral thinking. Even if one disagrees with the details of his history, the interesting meta-ethical point is that we cannot properly understand the ethical thinking of modernity without recognizing an Aristotelian form animated by the hermeneutical development of intersubjectively constituted meanings.

Taylor's critique has been called into question by defenders of modern moral theory who insist it has an appreciable place for the good. This line of argument can be seen as a more specific version of the general complaint made against anti-theorists that they operate with a strawperson conception of moral 'theory.' These counter critiques of anti-theory can be seen as insisting that moral theory be seen as a deliberative framework rather than as a decision procedure. This means two things: (a) that moral theory incorporates a conception of value orienting its rules and (b) does not necessarily entail the deployment of a decision algorithm. A careful analysis of two leading modern moral theorists of different camps—namely, R.M. Hare (utilitarianism) and Barbara Herman (neo-Kantainism)—confirmed the above suspicions that modern moral theory is far subtler than Taylor assumes. Both have a place for "qualitative distinctions" within the broader framework of the theory.

Nevertheless, we still saw the relevance of Taylor's critique. Even if deliberative frameworks incorporate a conception of value that orients the theory's prescriptions and even if they don't

---

[957] Jürgen Habermas, "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" in *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 3-4. As Korsgaard writes, "The ethics of autonomy is the only one consistent with the metaphysics of the modern world, and the ethics of autonomy is an ethics of obligation." Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 5.
[958] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), 3-4, 520.

straightjacket ethical deliberation with a kind of moral decision-making algorithm, they still tend to define moral thinking in terms of an ultimate criterion (e.g., the universalization procedure found in both Hare and Herman's thinking). The "qualitative distinctions" that inform our ethical thinking are made subservient to these higher-level principles. This way of absorbing substantive ethical notions into a moral theory has the tendency to distort them. Moreover, these theories had the further problem of neglecting the broader contexts of the good, i.e., constitutive goods. We saw a hint of this in Herman's theory, but even then our most basic character *qua* rational agents was merely asserted. Taylor's hermeneutical conception of human agency goes deeper and discloses the Kantian conception of what we most essentially *are* as itself an interpretation rather than a brute given. If Taylor is right that we are most fundamentally self-interpreting animals, then we are forced to reconceive the Kantian claim as one interpretation of our moral sentiments among others. Taylor's position thus pushes us towards a self-consciously hermeneutical conception of moral philosophy in a way that is foreign to even the subtler variants of modern moral philosophy.

# Works Cited

Abbey, Ruth. *Charles Taylor.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Adams, Robert Merrihew. *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

Anderson, Elizabeth. *Value in Ethics and Economics.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Anderson, Joel. "The Personal Lives of Strong Evaluators: Identity, Pluralism, and Ontology in Charles Taylor's Value Theory." *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 17–38.

Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

———. "On Brute Facts." *Analysis* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 1958): 69–72.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006.

———. *Experiments in Ethics.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Arpaly, Nomy. "Comment." In *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters,* by Susan Wolf, 85-91. Princeton University Press 2010.

Baier, Annette. "Doing Without Moral Theory?" In *Postures of Mind*, 228–245. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

———. "Extending the Limits of Moral Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (October 1986): 538-545.

———. "Theory and Reflective Practices." In *Postures of Mind*, 207–227. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

———. "Trust and Antitrust." In *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*, 95–129. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?" In *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*, 1–17. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Berlin, Isaiah. "The Pursuit of the Ideal." In *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, edited by Henry Hardy, 1–19. London: John Murray, 1990.

Bilgami, Akeel. "The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay." In *Naturalism and Normativity*, 23–54. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Blackburn, Simon. "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value." In *Morality and Objectivity*, edited by Ted Honderich, 1–22. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Blum, Lawrence A. *Moral Perception and Particularity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Brandom, Robert B. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Brandt, Richard B. *A Theory of the Good and the Right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

Brewer, Talbot. *The Retrieval of Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Brink, David O. "Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View." *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 8 (1986): 417–438.

Churchland, Patricia S. *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Clark, Stephen R.L. "Taylor's Waking Dream: No One's Reply." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 195–215.

Clarke, Stanley G. "Anti-Theory in Ethics." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1987): 237–244.

Clarke, Stanley G., and Evan Simpson. "Introduction: The Primacy of Moral Practice." In *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservativism*, edited by Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, 1–25. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Connolly, William E. "Catholicism and Philosophy: A Nontheistic Appreciation." In *Charles Taylor*, edited by Ruth Abbey, 166–186. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Cottingham, John. "Impartiality and Ethical Formation." In *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships, and the Wider World*, edited by Brian Feltham and John Cottingham, 65–83. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

———. *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Cullity, Garrett, and Berys Gaut. "Introduction." In *Ethics and Practical Reason*, edited by Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, 1–28. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Darwall, Stephen L. "Abolishing Morality." *Synthese* 72 (July 1987): 71–89.

De Caro, Mario, and Alberto Voltolini. "Is Liberal Naturalism Possible?" In *Naturalism and Normativity*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 69–86. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Diamond, Cora. "Losing Your Concepts." *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1988): 255–277.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. "Taylor's (Anti-)Epistemology." In *Charles Taylor*, 52–83. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Dupré, John. "The Miracle of Monism." In *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 36–58. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Flanagan, Owen. "Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection." *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 1 (1986): 41–60.

———. "Ethics Naturalized: Ethics as Human Ecology." In *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics*, edited by Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark, 19–44. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

———. "Identity and Strong and Weak Evaluation." In *Identity, Character, and Morality*, edited by Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 37–65. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990.

———. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

———. *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

———. "Varieties of Naturalism." In *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Society*, edited by Philip Clayton, 430–452. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Flanagan, Owen, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong. "Naturalizing Ethics." In *Moral Psychology Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 1–25. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

Foot, Philippa. "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" In *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 181–188. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978.

———. "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." In *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 157–173. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978.

———. *Natural Goodness.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

Forst, Rainer. *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism.* Translated by John M. M. Farrell. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." In *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*, 11–25. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

———. "Rationalism in Ethics." In *Autonomes Handeln: Beiträge Zur Philosophie Von Harry G. Frankfurt*, edited by Monika Betzler and Barbara Guckes, 259–273. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000.

———. *The Reasons of Love.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

———. "The Strange Estrangement: Charles Taylor and the Natural Sciences." In *Available Light: Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, 143–159. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Gibbard, Allan. "Why Theorize How to Live with Each Other?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (June 1995): 323–342.

———. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Goetz, Stewart, and Charles Taliaferro. *Naturalism.* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008.

Gutting, Gary. *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What Is the 'Good Life'?" In *The Future of Human Nature*, translated by William Rehg, 1–15. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003.

———. "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification." In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 43–115. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990.

———. "On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason." In *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, 1–18. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994.

———. "Remarks on Discourse Ethics." In *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, translated by Ciarin Cronin, 19–112. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994.

Haidt, Jonathan. "Comment." In *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters,* by Susan Wolf, 92-101. Princeton University Press 2010.

Hampshire, Stuart. *Morality and Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Hare, R.M. "Comments on Williams." In *Hare and Critics*, edited by Douglas Seanor and Nick Fotion, 287–293. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

———. "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism." In *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, edited by Amartha Sen and Bernard Williams, 23–38. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

———. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.

———. *Moral Thinking*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

———. *Sorting Out Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

———. *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

Herman, Barbara. "Leaving Deontology Behind." In *The Pratice of Moral Judgment*, 208–240. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

———. "Middle Theory and Moral Theory." *Noûs* 25, no. 2 (1991): 183–184.

———. "Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties." In *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 132–158. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

———. "Morality and Everyday Life." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 74, no. 2 (November 2000): 29–45.

———. "Pluralism and the Community of Judgment." In *Moral Literacy*, 29–50. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

———. "The Practice of Moral Judgment." In *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 73–93. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

———. "Training to Autonomy." In *Moral Literacy*, 130–153. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Jager, Colin. "This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor's Romanticism." In *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, edited by Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, 166–192. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

James, William. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 141–162. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

———. "What Is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9 (April 1884): 188–205.

Joas, Hans. *The Genesis of Values*. Translated by Gregory Moore. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Johnson, Mark. "How Moral Psychology Changes Moral Theory." In *Mind and Morals: Essays on Cognitive Science and Ethics*, edited by Larry May, Marilyn Friedman, and Andy Clark, 45–68. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

———. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993.

Kerr, Fergus. "Charles Taylor's Moral Ontology of the Self." In *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, 136–158. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.

Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity*. Edited by Onora O'Neill. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Kymlicka, Will. "The Ethics of Inarticulacy." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 155–182.

Laitinen, Arto. *Strong Evaluation Without Moral Sources: On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.

Larmore, Charles. "Review of *Sources of the Self*." *Ethics* 102 (October 1991): 158–162.

Leiter, Brian. "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics." *Ethics* 107 (January 1997): 250–285.

Louden, Robert B. *Morality and Moral Theory: A Reappraisal and Reaffirmation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Low‑Beer, Martin. "Living a Life and the Problem of Existential Impossibility." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 217–236.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

———. "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science." *The Monist* 60 (October 1977): 453–472.

———. "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues, and Goods." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1992): 3–19.

———. "The Elusive Starting-Point of Deliberation: A Crux in Bernard Williams's Thought." Lecture, Ethics and the Place of Philosophy from University of Chicago, Chicago, October 28-29 2011.

———. "The Privatization of Good: An Inaugural Lecture." *Review of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 344–361.

———. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

Mackie, J.L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

MacPherson, David. "To What Extent Must We Go Beyond Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 627–654.

McDowell, John. "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 52 (1978): 13–29.

———. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

———. "Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind." In *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 91–105. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

———. "Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following." In *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, edited by Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich, 141–162. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

———. "Two Sorts of Naturalism." In *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 167–197. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

———. "Virtue and Reason." *The Monist* 62 (July 1979): 331–350.

Moody-Adams, Michele M. *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Moore, A.W. "Maxims and Thick Ethical Concepts." *Ratio* 19. New Series (June 2006): 129–147.

Moran, Richard. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Morgan, Michael L. "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse." In *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, edited by James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock, 37–48. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch." In *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, 43–50. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

———. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

———. "The Sublime and the Good." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi, 205–220. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

———. "Vision and Choice in Morality." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volumes 30 (January 1956): 14–58.

Nagel, Thomas. "The Fragmentation of Value." In *Mortal Questions*, 128–141. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

———. *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Noble, Cheryl. "Normative Ethical Theories." *The Monist* 62 (October 1979): 496–509.

Nussbaum, Martha C. "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics." In *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, edited by J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, 86–131. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

———. "Charles Taylor: Explanation and Practical Reason." In *The Quality of Life*, edited by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartha Sen, 232–241. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

———. "Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy." In *Love's Knowledge*, 125–147. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

———. *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

———. "Non-Relative Virtues." In *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Ethical Theory, Character and Virtue*, edited by Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, 32–53. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

———. "Our Pasts, Ourselves." *The New Republic* (April 9, 1990): 27–34.

———. "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality." In *Love's Knowledge*, 54–105. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

———. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. "Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour." In *Moral Particularism*, edited by Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, 227–255. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

O'Neill, Onora. "Consistency in Action." In *Constructions of Reason: Exploring Kant's Practical Philosophy*, 81–104. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

———. "Kant After Virtue." *Inquiry* 26 (December 1983): 387–405.

———. "Principles and Practical Judgment." *The Hastings Center Report* 31 (August 2001): 15–23.

Pincoffs, Edmund. "Quandary Ethics." *Mind* 80, no. 320. New Series (October 1, 1971): 552–571.

Prichard, H. A. "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind* 21, no. 81 (January 1912): 21–37.

Prinz, Jesse. "Emotions Embodied." In *Thinking About Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*, edited by Robert C Solomon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Putnam, Hilary. *Ethics Without Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

———. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

———. "The Content and Appeal of Naturalism." In *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 89–99. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Quinn, Warren. "Putting Rationality in Its Place." In *Morality and Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Railton, Peter. "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 1984): 134–171.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

———. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Edited by Erin Kelly. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.

———. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

———. "The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 449–472. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Raz, Joseph. "Notes on Value and Objectivity." In *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action*, 118–160. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Redhead, Mark. *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Rehg, William. *The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.

Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg, and David Wong. "Aspects of Identity and Agency." In *Identity, Character, and Morality*, edited by Owen Flanagan and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 19–36. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990.

Rorty, Richard. "Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 197–201.

Rosa, Hartmut. "Cultural Relativism and Social Criticism from a Taylorian Perspective." *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 39–60.

———. *Identität Und Kulturelle Praxis: Politische Philosophie Nach Charles Taylor*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998.

Rosen, Michael. "Must We Return to Moral Realism?" *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 183–194.

Ryle, Gilbert. "Feelings." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (April 1951): 193–205.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet. London: Routledge, 1994.

Scanlon, T. M. "Moral Theory: Understanding and Disagreement." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 2 (June 1, 1995): 343–356.

———. "The Aims and Authority of Moral Theory." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 12 (Spring 1992): 1–23.

———. "Thickness and Theory." *The Journal of Philosophy* 100, no. 6 (June 2003): 275–287.

———. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.

Scheffler, Samuel. *Human Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Sellars, Wilfrid. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Edited by Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Shklar, Judith N. "Review of *Sources of the Self*." *Political Theory* 19, no. 1 (February 1991): 105–109.

Singer, Peter. "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972): 229–243.

Skinner, Quentin. "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections." In *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, edited by James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock, 37–48. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

———. "Who Are 'We'? Ambiguities of the Modern Self." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991): 133–153.

Slote, Michael. *Morals from Motives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Smith, Nicholas H. *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002.

———. *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity*. London: Routledge, 1997.

———. "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition." In *Charles Taylor*, edited by Ruth Abbey, 29–51. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Solomon, Robert C. *True to Our Feelings : What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Sorell, Tom. *Moral Theory and Anomaly*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

Soskice, Janet Martin. "Love and Attention." In *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Stroud, Barry. "The Charm of Naturalism." In *Naturalism in Question*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 21–35. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Taylor, Charles. "A Catholic Modernity?" In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 167–187. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. "A Most Peculiar Institution." In *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, edited by J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, 132–155. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

———. *A Secular Age*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

———. "Afterword: Apologia Pro Libro Suo." In *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, edited by Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, 300–324. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

———. "Comments and Replies." *Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (1991).

———. "Enchantment-Reenchantment." In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 287–302. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger." In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, edited by Charles Guignon, 317–336. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

———. "Ethics and Ontology." *The Journal of Philosophy* 100 (June 2003): 305–320.

———. "Explanation and Practical Reason." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 34–60. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 100–126. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Introduction." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 1–12. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy." In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 3–23. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. "Irreducibly Social Goods." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 127–145. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Justice After Virtue." In *After MacIntyre*, edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus, 16–43. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

———. "Language and Human Nature." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 215–247. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. "Language and Society." In *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's Communicative Action*, edited by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, 23–35. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.

———. "Language Not Mysterious?" In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 39–55. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. "Leading a Life." In *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, edited by Ruth Chang, 170–183. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

———. "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels Between Heidegger and Wittgenstein." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 61–78. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, 26–49. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———. "Modern Moral Rationalism." In *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, edited by Santiago Zabala, 57–76. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007.

———. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

———. "Overcoming Epistemology." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 1–19. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Overcoming Modern Epistemology." In *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology in Honour of Fergus Kerr*, edited by Simon Oliver and Karen Kilby, 43–60. London: T & T Clark International, 2012.

———. "Preface," In *Philosophical Arguments*, vii-xii. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Plurality of Goods." In *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*, edited by Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert B. Silvers, 113–119. New York: New York Review of Books, 2001.

———. "Reason, Faith, and Meaning." *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (January 2011): 5–18.

———. "Reply and Re-Articulation." In *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, edited by James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock, 213–257. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

———. "Reply to Commentators." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (March 1994): 203–213.

———. "Responsibility for Self." In *The Identities of Persons*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 281–299. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

———. "Retrieving Realism." In *Mind, Reason, and Being-In-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, edited by Joseph K. Schear, 61–90. New York: Routledge, 2013.

———. "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition." In *Reading Rorty*, edited by Alan Malachowski, 257–275. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

———. "Self-Interpreting Animals." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 45–76. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

———. "The Concept of a Person." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 97–114. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. "The Dialogical Self." In *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, edited by David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, 304–314. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

———. "The Diversity of Goods." In *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 230–247. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

———. "The Importance of Herder." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 79–99. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "The Motivation Behind a Procedural Ethics." In *Kant and Political Philosophy*, edited by Ronald Beiner and William James Booth, 337–360. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

———. "The Perils of Moralism." In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, 347–366. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 225–256. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 20–33. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Theories of Meaning." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 248–292. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. "To Follow a Rule." In *Philosophical Arguments*, 165–180. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

———. "Two Theories of Modernity." *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 153–174.

———. "What Is Human Agency?" In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, 15–44. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

———. "What's Wrong with Foundationalism?" In *Heidgger, Coping, and Cognitive Science*, edited by Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, 115–134. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000.

Thomas, Alan. *Value and Context: The Nature of Moral and Political Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

Tugendhat, Ernst. "Korreferat Zu Charles Taylor: What Is Human Agency?" In *Philosophische Aufsätze*, 441–452. Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1992.

Tully, James, and Daniel M. Weinstock, eds. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Urmson, J.O. "A Defense of Intuitionism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75. New Series (1975 1974): 111–119.

Wallace, James D. "Theorizing About Morals." *Noûs* 25 (1991): 176–183.

Walzer, Michael. *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Watson, Gary. "Free Agency." In *Agency and Answerability*, 13–32. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Wiggins, David. "A Sensible Subjectivism?" In *Needs, Values, Truth*, 185–211. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

Williams, Bernard. "A Critique of Utilitarianism." In *Utilitarianism For and Against*, edited by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, 77–150. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

———. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. London: Routledge, 1978.

———. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard University Press, 1985.

———. "Internal and External Reasons." In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, 101–113. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

———. "Modernity and the Substance of Ethical Life." In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn, 40–51. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

———. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck*, 20–39. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

———. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

———. "Naturalism and Genealogy." In *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, edited by Edward Harcourt, 148–161. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. "Persons, Character, and Morality." In *Moral Luck*, 1–19. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

———. "Replies." In *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, edited by J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, 185–224. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

———. "The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and the Ambitions of Ethics." In *Making Sense of Humanity*, 153–171. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

———. "The Primacy of Dispositions." In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, edited by A. W. Moore, 67–75. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

———. "The Republican and Galilean: Review of Sources of the Self." *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 17 (November 8, 1990): 45–47. http://www.www.nybooks.com/articles/3461 (accessed November 14, 2009).

———. "The Structure of Hare's Theory." In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, edited by A.W. Moore, 76–85. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

———. "Truth in Ethics." In *Truth in Ethics*, edited by Brad Hooker, 19-34. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Wolf, Susan. "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207–225.

———. "Meaning and Morality." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97. New Series (January 1997): 299–315.

———. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters:* Princeton University Press, 2010.

———. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (August 1982): 419–439.

———. "Morality and the View from Here." *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 203–223.

———. "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment." In *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, edited by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, 71–92. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.