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## Strong Evaluation and Weak Ontology. The Predicament of Charles Taylor

Michiel Meijer

*Department of Philosophy, University of Antwerp, Belgium*

One of the most striking characteristics of the work of Charles Taylor is its wide range of concerns.<sup>1</sup> He has been engaging in such various discussions that his thoughts have been collected in series of ‘philosophical papers,’ ‘philosophical arguments,’ and the ‘dilemmas and connections’ with which he has been involved throughout his career.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a kind of union throughout his concerns despite the wide spectrum of themes, as Taylor himself notes in the introduction of the *Philosophical Papers*.<sup>3</sup> The tendency to connect rather than to separate philosophical questions is related to another quality of his work: his distinctive style of writing. Since the very beginning Taylor has been developing a terminology that challenges the more familiar terms used by philosophers. Some of his concepts even explicitly straddle the boundaries of the philosophical domains he seeks to explore.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, he has been chided for being too ‘idiosyncratic’ (Kymlicka 1991, 159) or simply for ‘blurring’ basic distinctions (Johnston 1999, 101, 106), but these comments neglect the kind of strategy Taylor is actually employing. His thought typically thrives by providing a set of new concepts (categories, illustrations, metaphors) that he uses in a variety of ways and in pursuit of different, often conflicting, ends. Driven by an ongoing dissatisfaction with the ways in which problems are formulated in dominant philosophical debates, his aim is to *articulate* problems rather than to solve them, to map a terrain and describe related phenomena rather than to have the final word on the issue.

However, when this element of Taylor’s thought is appreciated, we might ask: What is the actual terrain he has been exploring? There is no doubt that his explorational style has allowed for multiple interpretations of his claims, both by his critics and his interpreters. Taylor’s philosophical background, for example, has been traced back to Plato,<sup>5</sup> Aristotle,<sup>6</sup> Kant,<sup>7</sup> Hegel,<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty,<sup>9</sup> Murdoch,<sup>10</sup> and Christianity,<sup>11</sup> while Taylor himself consistently emphasizes to be indebted foremost to Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, many attempts have been made to uncover Taylor’s ‘own’ position. To mention only a few, his views have been presented as moving from a relativist position to a more realist view and vice versa (Bohman 1991, Rosa 1995); or as a slide into ‘Platonism’ or some other ‘return’ to moral realism (Olafson 1994, 194, Rosen 1991, 183-194). He has been characterized as a ‘teleologist [who] believes in essences’ (Berlin 1994, 1-2), a ‘strong realist’ (MacIntyre 1996, 523, cf. Laitinen 2008, 46), and a ‘weak ontologist’ (White 2000, 43). Taylor’s arguments have been discredited as ‘excessively moralistic’ and ‘heavily intellectualist’ (Flanagan 1996, 146, 157), or rejected altogether both for being ‘too ambitious’ and ‘too modest’ (Johnston 1999, 100), while others have celebrated his ‘brilliant’ analysis of our moral predicament (Rorty 1994, 199) and his ‘importantly true’ claims about the nature of moral experience (Williams 1990, 9). More broadly, his work has

been praised for ‘its remarkable consistency’ (Weinstock 1994, 171), for ‘the challenge it poses to naturalistic conceptions of evaluation’ (Anderson 1996, 35), and for taking on ‘the most delicate and exacting of philosophical questions, the question of who we are and how we should live’ (Nussbaum 1990, 34).

## 1. Strong evaluation as an inclusive concept

This paper seeks to pave the way for coming to grips with this hybrid thinker in two steps. First, by focusing on the one concept Taylor keeps on having recourse to throughout his diverse writings: *strong evaluation*. Second, however, the concept of strong evaluation is invoked mainly to open up the more fundamental problem of the conflicting strategies in his writings as a whole. The concept of strong evaluation is particularly illuminating in this respect, because Taylor’s use of this term clearly demonstrates the unconventional way in which he operates. A preoccupation with strong evaluation is active throughout Taylor’s oeuvre, and it has been taken up by many scholars.<sup>13</sup> In Taylor’s most basic definition, strong evaluation depicts a kind of reflection that involves ‘distinctions of worth’ (1985a, 3). However, because he uses the concept of strong evaluation in a variety of ways (descriptive, diagnostic, normative, critical), and connects it to different philosophical domains (philosophical anthropology, meta-ethics, phenomenology, ontology), it has been (mis)understood in a variety of ways. Against this background, I shall argue that a close examination of Taylor’s use of the concept of strong evaluation brings out more clearly the continuing concerns in his diverse writings as a whole.

Despite the numerous essays on Taylor’s views on strong evaluation, human agency, moral experience, and ontology, few attempts have been made at providing an overview of how these fit together.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, no one has explored the relationship between Taylor’s interrelated yet contrasting methodologies.<sup>15</sup> Few of his interpreters ever raise the issues of how Taylor’s profound and elaborate philosophical anthropology and his phenomenology of moral life relate to his very tentative views on ontology, or of how his unusual understanding and use of transcendental argumentation informs and supports his claims. This paper seeks to unlock the potential of Taylor’s thought by making accessible all of these questions.

Taylor’s thinking about strong evaluation can be divided into an early, middle, and late period; roughly the periods before, around and after the publication of *Sources of the Self* in 1989. The term ‘strong evaluation’ first appears in ‘Responsibility for Self’ (1976), a paper that was revised and re-published in the *Philosophical Papers* as ‘What is Human Agency?’ (1985h). This is at once the first and only text that is exclusively about strong evaluation. However, Taylor keeps on having recourse to the term in his key articles and books.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he rehabilitates the concept of strong evaluation in one of his most recent publications, after abandoning the term almost completely in *A Secular Age*.<sup>17</sup>

Taylor’s continuous and haphazard use of the concept seems to suggest that the issue has never really been settled in a definitive way.<sup>18</sup> In order to clarify the

complexity of strong evaluation, I will first reconstruct the genesis of the term in the *Philosophical Papers* of 1985, while also showing that Taylor's earliest writings can be seen as an illuminating prologue of the account of strong evaluation. Following this, I will briefly discuss the original and most conclusive account of strong evaluation; the paper 'What is Human Agency?' (§2). I will then introduce the issue of Taylor's conflicting methodologies by laying out the several themes and strategies behind the doctrine of strong evaluation as it is developed in his oeuvre as a whole (§3). I endorse this analysis in the following sections by giving a more detailed discussion of one of the tensions in Taylor's methods, that between his phenomenological account of morality and his ontological claims (§4-6). Finally, the last section throws a spotlight on Taylor's ambiguous use of the concept of ontology itself. Resisting the way in which most of his commentators have replied to this ambiguity, I argue that there is much to be gained from separating Taylor's ontological view from his other claims (§7).

## 2. The (pre-)origin of strong evaluation

The context in which Taylor introduces the concept of strong evaluation is first and foremost a polemical one. The doctrine of strong evaluation may therefore best be understood by contrast with what it denies. In a reflection on his major writings, Taylor summarizes the *Philosophical Papers* as a collection of

mostly critiques of mechanistic, and/or reductive, and/or atomistic approaches to human sciences. Following a similar line to *The Explanation of Behaviour*, I tried to show that the popularity of these approaches, which modeled human on natural science, depended on faulty philosophical thinking and/or obviously over-simplified views of human life (2007a).

In particular, as he explains in the introduction of the *Philosophical Papers*, his target is the commitment to 'naturalism' that in his view is shared by all reductive theories (1985a, 2). The attack on naturalism is a central motivation of Taylor's thought. Like the argument against psychological behaviourism in *The Explanation of Behaviour* (1964), it can generally be seen as a critique of a certain type of understanding of human life and action. Strong evaluation comes in at the heart of this critique, as a positive, counter-thesis about the self. He calls his rival account 'philosophical anthropology' – perhaps because of, rather than despite, his impression that 'this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy' (1985a, 1).

The aim of philosophical anthropology, as Taylor puts it in *The Explanation of Behaviour*, is to study 'the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained,' starting from the idea that 'a purpose or set of purposes which are intrinsically human can be identified' (1964, 4). The kind of critique Taylor thus needs against the background of this assumption is one that shows the inadequacy of any analysis of human agency supporting the opposite claim, that 'there is no difference in principle between the behaviour of animate organisms and

any other processes in nature, that the former can be accounted for in the same way as the latter, by laws relating to physical events' (1964, 3). Taylor's position implies, for example, that it is impossible to give an adequate account of human agency that excludes any description that bears on the significance of things for human beings. Or again, it implies that the difference between human and animal agency cannot be made intelligible from a perspective that homogenizes human motivation. Taylor chastises naturalism, then, precisely for denying the special status of human nature altogether:

'[N]aturalism,' by which I mean not just the view that man can be seen as part of nature – in one sense or other this would surely be accepted by everyone – but that the nature of which he is a part is to be understood according to the canons which emerged in the seventeenth-century revolution in natural science. One of the most important of these is that we must avoid anthropocentric properties [...] and give an account of things in absolute terms (1985a, 2).<sup>19</sup>

Following on from this definition, he argues that a reductionist or naturalist 'temper' is predominant not just in the outlooks of 'many students of the sciences of human behaviour,' but in our culture as such, 'stopping short frequently of explicit espousal of full-blooded naturalism, but tending to be suspicious of the things that naturalism cannot accommodate' (1964, 3, 1995d, 137). This observation, that most people are reluctant to embrace the full implications of a naturalist perspective and yet remain highly sceptical of all things that do not fit the naturalist model, I want to argue, is *the* underlying theme of Taylor's 'single rather tightly related agenda' (1985a, 1).

The polemical thrust of strong evaluation can be traced back even further. In this respect, Smith points out that Taylor is sceptical of the very enterprise of reductive analysis at the outset of his academic career, inspired by the linguistic philosophy that flourished at Oxford in the fifties.<sup>20</sup> Yet Taylor also emphasizes the limits of linguistic analysis: 'The reason why most philosophical problems can't be solved simply by the study of ordinary language is that they do not arise there. They arise within such bodies of doctrine as theology, metaphysics or science or on the borderline between these and ordinary fact' (1959b, 107). Taylor makes a related point about language in a second early paper, entitled 'Ontology',<sup>21</sup> in which he argues that 'some strata of our language are [...] in conflict with others, i.e. they presuppose a "world" in which the things and happenings we speak about in the other strata cannot find a place' (1959a, 136). What is both intriguing and extremely puzzling about this text is that Taylor at once connects naturalism, language, ontology, and philosophical anthropology, when he says that

The problems are posed by the advance of science, or at least by a greater awareness of the nature of the world around us. Once we begin to talk about nature in terms that are not animistic, we begin to wonder about persons, for

they, after all, are parts of nature, are material objects also. But we want to say that they are something 'more' as well (1959a, 138).

This brings us back to the crucial observation mentioned above, that despite the inclination to make sense of our world in naturalist terms, we are equally inclined to think that human behaviour is in some way fundamentally different from the processes studied by natural scientists. It is this problem, I believe, that has led the young Taylor to the terrain of philosophical anthropology, the opening theme of his doctoral dissertation in 1964, *The Explanation of Behaviour*. As we shall see, it is in this philosophical anthropological context that he initiates his concept of strong evaluation.

There is, however, a third early text in which Taylor explores an additional philosophical area. Evoked perhaps by the drawbacks of linguistic philosophy, the young Taylor also shows an interest in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty's attempt to describe the 'pre-objective world' preceding the (limited) world of reductive, scientific discourse must have been very appealing to Taylor indeed. Unfortunately, on his reading, the method of phenomenological reduction that is supposed to open up the content of 'original' experience and to make possible a 'pure' description simply cannot succeed. As he says, 'to "suspend" one concept for re-examination requires that others are taken for granted in order to carry out this examination. [...] The very attempt to describe the pre-predicative seems to destroy it. This confusion in method is nowhere clarified by Merleau-Ponty' (1959b, 103, 1958, 113).

I will not discuss Taylor's views on linguistic philosophy and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology here.<sup>23</sup> For our purposes it suffices to illustrate how Taylor's early philosophical explorations and the introduction of the *Philosophical Papers* set the stage for his 'official' account of strong evaluation. Three points can be made here. First, Taylor's thought is triggered by a kind of frustration or dissatisfaction with views that were dominant at the beginning of his career, both with naturalist types of understanding of human agency, and with the philosophical methods of linguistic analysis and phenomenology. He chides naturalism for having an over-simplified view of human action, criticizes linguistic philosophers for their conviction that 'all philosophical problems arise from mistakes about language,' and rejects phenomenology because of the underlying belief 'that we can do without our concepts' (1959b, 109). Second, without being able to give any further justification for it, he is strongly convinced that all naturalist explanations are necessarily reductive, and that all reductive explanations of human behaviour are insufficient.<sup>24</sup> Third, although the young Taylor's multiple investigations of linguistic philosophy, ontology, and phenomenology ultimately orient him around philosophical anthropology, he does not want to stick to the principles of a specific philosophical method in approaching these issues. Nonetheless, the seemingly unrelated early writings raise a central question to which Taylor's more mature answer is, as we will see, strong evaluation.

In his first publication on strong evaluation, Taylor takes his cue from Harry Frankfurt's concept of 'second-order desires': a desire, to desire X, or, 'a want to have

(or not to have) certain desires and motives' (Frankfurt 1971, 5). For example, when I am asked how I will act when faced with a drowning child while eating a tasty ice cream at the beach, I will most likely reply that I would be inclined to save the child rather than to continue to enjoy my ice cream. The desire to desire to save the child rather than to identify with the desire for ice cream is a desire of the second order. Obviously, I do not care about having a desire for ice cream or not, but I do care about my desire to save the life of a child. If my will consists in saving the child, I identify with this desire rather than giving in to my yearning for ice cream. According to both Frankfurt and Taylor, this reflective act of caring about my will refers to something distinctively human, namely 'the capacity for reflective self-evaluation,' or, in Taylor's formulation, 'the power to *evaluate* our desires, to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable' (Frankfurt 1971, 11, Taylor 1985h, 15-16).

In developing his account of strong evaluation, Taylor builds further on Frankfurt's theory of second-order desires. He differs from Frankfurt in that he speaks of the worthiness of desires rather than their desirability. Furthermore, strong evaluation has a much wider focus than just desires. Its objects can also be values, actions, motives, emotions, characters, goals, or styles of life. On Taylor's account, 'evaluation' thus covers a wide spectrum of areas, addressing anything that could be picked out as an object of reflection in terms of worthiness. The basic idea is that being a human agent, person, or self<sup>25</sup> not only involves a basic understanding of oneself as the locus of one's desires, choices, and actions, but also seeing oneself against a background of 'distinctions of worth' (1985a, 3). Taylor puts it like this:

[O]ur self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation'. I mean by that a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value. [...] In other terms, to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. [...] My claim is that this is not just a contingent fact about human agents, but is essential to what we would understand and recognize as full, normal human agency (1985a, 3).

The focus thus shifts from mere desirability to issues of worth and value. The next step is to demonstrate that 'the fact of strong evaluation, the fact that we human subjects are not only subjects of first-order desires, but of second-order desires, desires about desires' is not only a distinctive, but also an inescapable feature of human agency and self-understanding (1985i, 220). Against this background, the central claim (most substantively developed in the first part of *Sources of the Self*) is that human action and self-understanding *must* involve a background of distinctions of worth, and that we are agents only through these qualitative distinctions.

### 3. Mapping the terrain of strong evaluation

After setting the stage in the *Philosophical Papers*, the doctrine of strong evaluation is continued in *Sources of the Self*. In this book, however, Taylor uses strong evaluation increasingly to endorse his meta-ethical account, which he calls exploring “moral phenomenology” (1989, 68, 74, 81). Furthermore, the term is employed in a more *critical* (rather than merely descriptive) way, challenging those ethical theories that cannot find a conceptual place for the issue of strong evaluation. The emphasis in the doctrine of strong evaluation thus shifts from an early philosophical anthropological concern towards a phenomenological critique of contemporary moral theory in the middle period.

Using the concept of strong evaluation in this new way, Taylor elaborates a critique of (utilitarian, neo-Kantian, naturalist, neo-Nietzschean) theories that, on his reading, either reduce, deny, suppress or repudiate altogether the phenomenon of strong evaluation. It is not just that he is not satisfied with reductive approaches to human action and experience. Rather, Taylor is not even sure that his opponents see the issue that he is trying to delineate about strong evaluation. He has, therefore, invested a great deal of effort into developing two distinct – yet closely related – arguments against the reductionist outlook that he believes is thriving ‘not only among professional philosophers, but with a wider public’ (1989, 3): a philosophical anthropology and a moral phenomenology. Both accounts invoke the issue of strong evaluation in a fundamental way.

Although Taylor’s philosophical anthropology and his phenomenological account of morality lay separate claims, they are entangled in such a fundamental way that the two can hardly be separated. He believes that selfhood and morality are ‘inextricably intertwined themes,’ because ‘our notion of the self is inextricably connected with our understanding of our moral predicament and moral agency’ (1989, 3, 1988, 298). From an argumentative point of view, the fusion of philosophical anthropology and ethics provides him with an argument that poses a double challenge to reductionism. Reductionist theories have been wrong on both counts, Taylor maintains, arguing that they simply cannot make sense of our moral experience, nor of the ways in which human beings actually live their lives. In fact, since ‘the whole naturalist bent of modern intellectual culture tends to discredit the idea of strong evaluation,’ his attempt is to show ‘that the vocabularies we need to explain human thought, action, feeling, or to explicate, analyze, justify ourselves or each other, or to deliberate on what to do, all inescapably rely on strong evaluation’ and that ‘we cannot understand ourselves, or each other, cannot make sense of our lives or determine what to do, without accepting a richer ontology than naturalism allows, without thinking in terms of strong evaluation’ (1995a, 38-39). As a philosophical anthropologist, he argues that ‘the complete Utilitarian would be an impossibly shallow character’ and ‘the imagined agent of naturalist theory [...] a monster,’ while ‘what we need to *explain* is people living their lives’ (1985h, 26, 1989, 32, 58). As a moral philosopher, he chides much modern and contemporary moral philosophy for

having a ‘cramped and truncated view of morality’ (1989, 3), unable to come to grips with ‘the whole way in which we think, reason, argue, and question ourselves about morality’ (1989, 7).

Taylor’s distinctive brand of morality can be considered as the entry through which his thinking moves from philosophical anthropology to meta-ethics. However, it also provides access to a rather different branch of his thoughts on strong evaluation: ontology. To put the matter in another way: There is, finally, another counterargument to reductionism that appears to be particularly distinctive of the late publications. Here, one might say, Taylor challenges reductionism ‘from the opposite direction’. Rather than to argue (both anthropologically and phenomenologically) that reductionist strategies fail to make sense of the way human beings value and experience the world, he now criticizes them for undermining the *objectivity* of the good that commands or inspires our deepest moral intuitions and reactions. The explicit ‘transsubjectivist’ nature of the ontological account supporting this claim seems to indicate a different kind of argument, allowing it to be discussed on top of Taylor’s claims about human subjectivity. In fact, ‘every anthropocentrism pays a terrible price in impoverishment in this regard,’ because the ‘exploration of the order in which we are set’ is ‘at its best, in full integrity [...] an attempt to surmount subjectivism’ (1994b, 213, 1989, 510). Making the same point in a more recent publication, Taylor explicitly connects strong evaluation with issues of ontology when he notes that ‘the understanding behind strong evaluations is that they track some reality’ and that it lies in the nature of strong evaluations ‘to claim truth, reality or objective rightness’ (2011b, 297, 298). As we shall see later on, this is in fact a very recent and rather undeveloped theme in Taylor’s oeuvre, as it deviates both from the philosophical anthropological concerns of the early writings and from the moral phenomenological investigations of the middle period.

What emerges from this outline is that Taylor’s concept of strong evaluation originates from a three-layered attack on reductive explanations of human life. As the central concept of all three axes of this critique, strong evaluation at once informs (1) Taylor’s philosophical anthropology, (2) his moral phenomenology, and (3) his views on ontology. Having identified the three-leveled nature and potential of the doctrine of strong evaluation, we can now focus on the questions invoked by this approach: What is the relationship between his diverse accounts? More particularly, what types of method does he use to back his claims? Does he distinguish between genuinely different modes of reasoning and understanding or is he simply saying the same thing in different ways? Yet if they are different, one might add, they should also be confined to different areas (e.g. arguments in philosophical anthropology, phenomenological explanation in meta-ethics, and reasoning in ontological debates). But what, then, is the relationship between the different arguments?

#### 4. Conflicting methodologies

Methodologically, there are thus four central domains in which Taylor employs his concept of strong evaluation: philosophical anthropology, phenomenology, meta-ethics, and ontology. I want to bring out a tension between at least two of these domains, and argue that the diversified nature of strong evaluation is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem in Taylor's philosophy, namely that of the relationship between his phenomenological approach to morality and his claims about ontology. Throughout different writings, Taylor touches the issue of what we are committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments, but there is always something tentative in his adhesion. The problem of how ethics and ontology are related is evoked in all the key publications on strong evaluation (*Philosophical Papers*, *Sources of the Self*, *Philosophical Arguments*) and called to mind once more in *A Secular Age*, but it is not extensively explored in any of these works.

On the one hand, it thus seems clear that Taylor sees this question as a valuable one. On the other, he never omits to insist that it is not all that clear how we should go about answering it. Ironically, even at the very end of 'Ethics and Ontology' (2003) – the paper in which he puts the connection between ethics and ontology forward as a central theme – Taylor is still becoming more aware of his own uncertainties, of how far he is from finding a proper formulation of the issue.<sup>26</sup> The same issue is raised in *A Secular Age*, in which Taylor asserts that one of the greatest challenges for ethics is 'the issue of how to align our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology' (2007b, 609).<sup>27</sup>

While the tension between subjectivist claims – of personal commitments, individual preferences, and the diversity of values – and claims of objectivity – of morality, impartiality, and the imperative nature of values – is only really put to work in these late, highly tentative writings, it is implicit in Taylor's oeuvre as a whole. Most notably, the two components are already present in the very structure of *Sources of the Self*: the first part makes the case for the objective features of selfhood and morality, whereas the rest of the book addresses the historically specific connections between senses of the self and moral visions (cf. 1989, x). In other words, the nature of morality, as Taylor envisages it, requires a double approach: both subjective and objective. While his historical reconstruction of the modern moral identity maps the subjective or contingent commitments of modern moral life; the objective dimension of the good turns on something different, and therefore necessitates an ontological, nonanthropocentric approach.

Although Taylor's central aim is 'to resolve the opposition itself by arguing that subjectivity and objectivity are essentially intertwined in the realm of value' (Anderson 1996, 17) there is a real tension from the outset with regard to his methodology. Taylor himself is fully aware of this. As he explains, 'the really difficult thing is distinguishing the human universals from the historical constellations and not eliding the second into the first so that our particular way seems somehow inescapable for humans as such, as we are always tempted to do' (1989, 112). His critics have

expressed similar concerns. Olafson, for example, finds it ‘extremely difficult to see what kind of balance Taylor thinks he has struck between a common and universal selfhood and the historically quite diverse versions of what selfhood involves’ (Olafson 1994, 193), while Flanagan finds it ‘extremely puzzling that such a historicist as Taylor is tempted to make such essentialist claims at all’ (Flanagan 1996, 154). In Taylor’s defense, Abbey suggests that ‘a useful way of understanding Taylor’s approach to selfhood is to distinguish [...] its historicist and its ontological dimensions’ (Abbey 2000, 56). Smith draws a similar distinction between the ‘historical’ and ‘transcendental’ levels of Taylor’s project, while adding that ‘it is not always clear where Taylor’s philosophical anthropology ends and where his philosophical history starts’ (Smith 2002, 7-8).

## **5. A phenomenological method with ontological implications**

It would seem, thus, that merely making a distinction between ‘things that change and those that stay the same’ (Abbey 2000, 10) does not fully capture the *source* of the difficulty. However, the issue looks surprisingly different when we consider Taylor’s ‘two-dimensional’ approach from a different methodological perspective. In my view, the conflict does not reside in the distinction between a historical and a ‘transcendental’ or ‘ontological’ approach, but in Taylor’s method of moral phenomenology on the one hand, and his claims about ontology on the other. The crucial point is this: Taylor wants to reject (what he sees as) narrow understandings of morality and to refute reductionist ontologies *at one stroke*.

We can illustrate this problem by looking at the beginning of *Sources of the Self*. In trying to understand our moral predicament, Taylor informs us, we must not let ourselves be influenced by ‘much contemporary moral philosophy’ because it ‘has given such a narrow focus to morality’ (1989, 3). In order to retrieve the moral and spiritual background of our ordinary reactions and responses we should rather put contemporary moral theorizing ‘in brackets,’ or ‘suspend’ its relevance, to put it in classic phenomenological terms.<sup>28</sup> For only if we succeed in doing so, Taylor maintains, will we be able to ‘uncover buried goods through rearticulation – and thereby to make these sources again empower’ (1989, 520). Here, then, is the reason why Taylor incites his readers to go through a kind of moral ‘phenomenological reduction’ with respect to their knowledge of what morality is, and to follow him in his disclosure of our ‘original’ moral and spiritual experience, without assuming the truth or validity of any moral theory. As a result, Taylor’s alternative to the reductionist mindset in contemporary ethics is in fact another kind of ‘reduction,’ a methodological one:

More broadly, I want to explore the background picture of our spiritual nature and predicament which lies behind some of the moral and spiritual intuitions of our contemporaries. [...] Here is where an important element of retrieval comes in, because much contemporary philosophy has ignored this dimension of our moral consciousness and beliefs altogether and has even

seemed to dismiss it as confused and irrelevant. I hope to show, contrary to this attitude, how crucial it is (1989, 3-4).

What is essential to the paradigmatic phenomenological method in Husserl's sense, however, is that we consider any statement about the external world as void of ontological implications. But this is a step Taylor does not want to take.<sup>29</sup> Quite to the contrary, the question that evolves out of the later writings is precisely 'how to *align* our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology' (2007b, 609, italics mine). It would seem, thus, unlike Husserl's phenomenology, that Taylor's moral phenomenological investigations indeed have certain ontological implications.

Both Smith (2002, 31-32) and Laitinen (2008, 79-80) have emphasized Taylor's ambivalent relation to phenomenology. On the one hand, Taylor is clearly indebted to modern phenomenology for his critique of the subject/object ontology introduced by Descartes.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, he has been sceptical from the outset of the very objective of a pure self-authenticating vocabulary of phenomenological description. He criticizes both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in this regard, arguing that 'the very attempt to describe the pre-predicative seems to destroy it. [...] We must always take some concepts for granted in examining others, accept some assumptions in order to call others into question' (1958, 113, 1959b, 103). However, the late Taylor informs us, the fact that we are 'always and inevitably thinking within such taken-as-there frameworks' does not mean that phenomenology's attempt to attain contact with reality is vain, but it does necessitate 'a reembedding of thought and knowledge in the bodily and social-cultural contexts in which it takes place' (2013, 75, 73). From here Taylor moves on to show that, *pace* the idea of 'pure,' presuppositionless description, the only contact with reality possible for human beings is 'the contact of living, active beings, whose life form involves acting in and on a world which also acts on them' (2013, 73). Thus, unlike Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, who proposed that in practicing phenomenology we ought to bracket the question of the existence of the world around us, Taylor maintains that his moral phenomenology puts the question of 'what [we] are committed to ontologically by our ethical views' (2003, 305), or 'of what ontology can underpin our moral commitments' (2007b, 607) right back on the agenda. In fact, he argues that his phenomenology of moral experience is allied with a realist ontology.<sup>31</sup>

Methodologically speaking, however, Taylor wants to have it both ways. His phenomenological critique of contemporary moral philosophy is based on – and therefore limited to – our own experience of being in the world; yet he *also* seeks to transcend human experience by raising the issue of what we are committed to ontologically by our moral intuitions. There is a real tension here: How to align Taylor's initial phenomenological turn 'inwards,' to the inner life of the subject, with his ontological claims about a world which also acts 'on us'?

The irony is that Taylor encounters this very problem already at the beginning of his academic career. As he says in the early paper on phenomenology: 'Merleau-Ponty's descriptions like all descriptions *commit him to a certain ontology*. If so, what status should we give to his ontology?' (1958, 131, italics mine) This fundamental

question can also be directed at Taylor's own account: What are we committed to ontologically by his moral phenomenology? As his thinking unfolds, Taylor touches on ethics and ontology all the time; but it is above all in the paper 'Ethics and Ontology' (2003) that he deals with the issue of their relationship most centrally. As has been noted, Taylor's ontological investigations have been quite exploratory and tentative. The really astonishing thing is that, published 45 years later, this paper on the ontological implications of moral experience is hardly more explicit than the allusions of the early text on Merleau-Ponty. Note the open end that characterizes both texts: He dismisses the issue of Merleau-Ponty's ontology as 'too complex to be treated here,' while the more recent paper breaks off with the comment that 'the conceptual means at my disposal are still too crude to explore this in an illuminating fashion' (1958, 132, 2003, 320). In other words, Taylor is reaffirming a crucial uncertainty with which he has been struggling all along.

## 6. Taylor's predicament

Many of Taylor's commentators praise him for his phenomenological account of moral experience,<sup>32</sup> but seem to lose track of what he is trying to do along the second, ontological dimension. As Bernard Williams brilliantly puts it: 'From a strong base in experience, Taylor very rapidly moves uphill, metaphysically speaking' (Williams 1990, 9). Johnston sees more than an argumentative sleight of hand in this two-stage approach, writing that Taylor's conceptualizations 'both point towards subjectivism as much as objectivism' in such an ambiguous way that 'the nature of his own position becomes fundamentally unclear' (Johnston 1999, 105). The central worry, it would seem, is not that (part of) Taylor's thought necessarily turns to the subject and its interiority, but rather that he also makes a move 'outwards,' raising the issue of the ontological underpinnings of morality. Both this outer ontological turn and his analysis of human subjectivity are constitutive of Taylor's rich philosophical framework. But it is nowhere clarified – neither by Taylor, nor by his interpreters – how these different investigations actually solve the tension between the subjective and the objective character of his claims. Put differently, what is this 'intersecting zone' between ethics and ontology; between our experience as moral agents, on the one hand, and the ontology to which we want to subscribe, on the other?

There is more. As has been noted, Taylor's project primarily presents itself as a *critique* of the reductionist attitude he believes to be commonplace in our culture. He therefore also raises the issue of ontology to criticize a reductionist ontology, arguing that there is a 'lack of fit' between our experience as moral agents, on the one hand, and 'the ontology we allow ourselves as post-Galilean naturalists,' on the other (2003, 320). At one stroke, Taylor thus wants both to diagnose our moral predicament in phenomenological and ontological terms, *and* to refute naturalism. He then seems to overplay his hand when he seeks to establish the critique of naturalism through transcendental argumentation. As Taylor himself emphasizes, the reach of this phenomenological type of argument is necessarily limited:

‘Transcendental arguments [...] prove something quite strong about the subject of experience and the subject’s place in the world; and yet since they are grounded in the nature of experience, *there remains an ultimate, ontological question they can’t foreclose*’ (1995g, 33, italics mine).

Since transcendental arguments are anchored in human experience, it must also be clear that ontological questions lie beyond their scope. This implies that, in his critique of naturalism, Taylor *himself* cannot get away from the qualitative discontinuity between morality and ontology. But he does not stop here. Given the initial polemical thrust of his thought, Taylor surely does not want his account to have merely diagnostic validity. The question that arises out of all this is whether his moral phenomenological strategy does not cut him off from the issue of ontology that he is trying to delineate at the same time. Is Taylor overplaying his hand here? Or is his predicament rather symptomatic of the problem initially brought forward by his own diagnosis? How to explore this issue – that the cross pressures between ethical and ontological commitments are manifest even in Taylor’s *own* critical efforts – in an illuminating fashion? To what extent is transcendental argumentation a proper mode of dealing with the problem?

## **7. Isolating the issue of ontology**

Note that this is just one tension in Taylor’s philosophy. Considering the three levels of the doctrine of strong evaluation (as described in §3), we can ask similar questions of coherence about all of these domains. In other words, what is the relationship between Taylor’s philosophical anthropological, phenomenological, meta-ethical, and ontological concerns? Clearly, all these terms relate to the wider question of what it is to be human, but how to go from one field to another? It emerges from the above discussion that these connections are far from self-evident.

Of course, in dividing Taylor’s ontological investigations from his philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology, I am ‘trying to sever themes that resist separation’ (Abbey 2000, 3-4), because he not only combines ontology with philosophical anthropology, but also has a way of entwining ontological reflections with his account of morality.<sup>33</sup> Yet I think that making these distinctions will add some clarity, or at least uncover fundamental difficulties. In so doing, however, I am resisting a common trend in recent studies of Taylor’s work. In reply to Taylor’s inclination to make connections where the more familiar categories used by philosophers aim at separation, most commentators simply follow his language and employ a broad or relaxed notion of ontology, using, for example, the terms ‘philosophical anthropology’ and ‘ontology’ interchangeably. It is clear that Taylor does not see contradiction in synchronizing philosophical anthropology and ontology. As he says in a paper on Stephen White’s book on ontology in political theory:

My term ‘philosophical anthropology’ is meant to cover much the same

matters as White does with ‘ontology’: it tries to define certain fundamental features about human beings, their place in nature, their defining capacities [...] and their most powerful or basic motivations, goals, needs, and aspirations (2005, 35).

White makes the same point when he assures that his own notion of ‘weak ontology’ is ‘largely appropriate for the kind and level of philosophical reflection he [Taylor] has in mind,’ because ‘he [Taylor] speaks, for example, of the “ontology of human life: what kinds of things can you invoke in talking about human beings in the different ways we do: describing, deliberating, judging, etc.?”’ (White 2000, 43, Taylor 1990, 261). There are many other commentators who uphold Taylor’s broad notion of ontology. Abbey, for example, speaks of the ‘ontological features of the self’ (Abbey 2000, 56). Saurette sketches strong evaluation as ‘an inescapable ontological element constitutive of human agency,’ while Smith, Kerr, and Laitinen literally follow Taylor in depicting his philosophical anthropology as ‘an ontology of the human,’ a ‘moral ontology of the human,’ or an ‘ontology of human persons’.<sup>34</sup>

It would seem, thus, that his commentators, like Taylor himself, do not take a big interest in differentiating these topics from one another. At the same time, however, most of Taylor’s interpreters do recognize a kind of tension implicit in his terminology. Abbey notes that ‘not all of Taylor’s interpreters have appreciated his two-dimensional approach to the self’ (Abbey 2000, 56) referring to the critiques of Olafson (1994, 192-193), Rosa (1995, 25) and Flanagan (1996, 154). Saurette ensures that Taylor’s ‘definition of human agency is not guaranteed by the authority of an ontology’ (Saurette 2005, 208). Analogously, Smith observes that ‘Taylor runs the risk of “anthropologizing” or “ontologizing” historically contingent features of subjectivity’ (Smith 2002, 8), while Kerr insists that we ‘might want to hear much more about the ambiguities inherent in this version of a “moral ontology of the human”,’ stressing the uncertain and tentative nature of Taylor’s ontological view (Kerr 2004, 101). Surprisingly though, despite their observations, none of these authors take the opportunity to challenge Taylor’s terminology at this point.

Against the background of these discussions one might conclude that, since neither Taylor himself nor his commentators see the need to question his vocabulary, the burden of proof is with those who claim that this kind of terminology is distorting. This is my claim indeed, for the crucial point is that an overly broad or relaxed notion of ontology conceals the fundamental tension between the subjective and the objective I mentioned earlier, between Taylor’s methods of philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology on the one hand, and his defence of moral realism on the other. Rather than to rate these on a par, I want to push beyond this and criticize Taylor at this point.

In my view, it is a source of great confusion that Taylor does not clearly separate his anthropological and phenomenological claims about human subjectivity from his objectivist account of the ontological underpinnings of our subjective commitments. Basically, my point is that you can account for a large part of Taylor’s work without invoking the word ‘ontology’ at all. There is something puzzling about

the very expression 'ontology of the human' as a designation of certain features of human experience. However, the fact that the transcendental argument that is supposed to secure Taylor's most fundamental claims, has, as he says, both a 'phenomenological moment' and establishes a kind of 'realism' (1994b, 209), suggests at least that there is more at stake than just some conceptual confusion. As I noted above, simply charging Taylor with idiosyncrasy or conceptual mistreatment is beside the point. As though you could just solve the issue by having recourse to a more conventional vocabulary.<sup>35</sup> And yet, at the level of transcendental justification, Taylor is open to the charge that philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology are just not the right methods to use in defense of ontological claims. To conclude my point, what gets lost from view in a relaxed notion of ontology is how Taylor's realist claims are backed up by his arguments, since these can be supported neither by philosophical anthropology, nor by moral phenomenology. The really puzzling thing is that Taylor himself insists on this point.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result, I think there is much to be gained from separating Taylor's philosophical claims as far as his terminology permits, because it brings out more clearly the differences between his first critique of reductionism, i.e. a philosophical anthropological account of the nature of human agency; a second, meta-ethical argument against narrow understandings of morality; and a third, ontological view that challenges reductionist ontologies. Making these distinctions in the full knowledge of the underlying connections, the focus could not but be on strong evaluation as a binding theme, because Taylor employs this term especially to *straddle* the boundaries of these three levels. Moreover, because strong evaluation generates a variety of methods as well, a close examination of this concept paves the way for raising the very question of how Taylor's tightly related yet different arguments fit together. This way of conceptually carving up Taylor's immensely rich philosophical thought not only enables us to get a better grip on the distinct levels of strong evaluation; it also opens up the question of their relationship and the metaphysical status of Taylor's ontological view.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His oeuvre covers the subjects of philosophical anthropology, moral theory, the history of philosophy, theories of subjectivity, political theory, epistemology, hermeneutics, ontology, phenomenology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, aesthetics, religion, and secularism.

<sup>2</sup> See (1985a, e, 1995f, 2011a).

<sup>3</sup> 'Despite the appearance of variety in the papers published in this collection, they are the work of a monomaniac [...] If not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda underlies all of them' (1985a, 1).

<sup>4</sup> This is particularly explicit in his concepts of 'moral phenomenology' (1988, 301, 1989, 68, 74, 81, 1995d, 134) and 'moral ontology' (1989, 8-10, 41, 72).

<sup>5</sup> Olafson (1994, 193-194), Smith (1997, 136).

<sup>6</sup> Abbey (2000, 12), Beam (1997, 771), Laitinen (2008, 33), Thiebaut (1993, 129).

<sup>7</sup> Saurette (2005, 197-233).

<sup>8</sup> Berlin (1994, 1).

<sup>9</sup> Smith (2002, 1).

<sup>10</sup> Kerr (2004, 84-85, 90).

<sup>11</sup> Berlin (1994, 1), Lane (1992, 46-48), O'Hagan (1993, 74, 81), Skinner (1991, 133, 147-150), Williams (1990, 2, 7-8). Taylor's Catholicism has worried some critics more than others. There is wide disagreement about the type of theism Taylor is (supposedly) defending, varying from the observation that he is 'wonderfully unpreachy' and 'unpretentious' (Williams 1990, 3) to caustic talk of 'his reason for urging the Judaeo-Christian religion upon us' (Skinner 1991, 149). In this category, Anderson (1996, 35) also lists Shklar (1991, 105-109), De Sousa (1994, 121), and Hittinger (1990, 125).

<sup>12</sup> References to Heidegger are numerous. The most crucial ones are (1985a, 3, 9, 11, 1985f, 45, 76, 1985c, 215, 1985g, 255, 1992, 133, 1989, 47, 50, 257, 481-482, 491, 524, 1995b, c, e, 2007b, 3, 13, 95, 558-559, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> See Taylor (1976, 1985a, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 1985e, Chapters 7-9, 1989, Chapters 1-4, 1995a, 2003, 2011b). For critical discussions of the concept of strong evaluation and related issues, see Abbey (2000, 2004), Anderson (1996), Beam (1997), Bohman (1991), Flanagan (1996), Johnston (1999), Kymlicka (1991), Laitinen (2008), Laitinen and Smith (2002), Lane (1992), Löw-Beer (1991), MacIntyre (1994, 1996), Nussbaum (1990), O'Hagan (1993), Olafson (1994), Redhead (2002), Rorty (1994), Rosa (1995), Rosa and Laitinen (2002), Rosen (1991), Saurette (2005), Skinner (1991), Smith (1996, 1997, 2002), Thiebaut (1993), Tully and Weinstock (1994), Weinstock (1994), Williams (1990), White (2000).

<sup>14</sup> Abbey (2000), Smith (2002). See also Laitinen (2008) for an elaborate discussion of the concept of strong evaluation, and Redhead (2002) for a focus on Taylor's political thoughts and affirmations.

<sup>15</sup> Though the issue has been brought up in an interview with Taylor by Rosa and Laitinen (2002, 183). Their question about the relationship between the three modes of reasoning Taylor employs in 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man' (1985b), 'Explanation and Practical Reason' (1995a), and 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments' (1995g) pioneers the issue I embark on in this study.

<sup>16</sup> See (1985d, 265, 1985f, 65-68, 73-74, 1985i, 220-222, 226, 1989, 4, 14, 20, 29-30, 42, 60, 63, 122, 249, 332-333, 336, 337, 383, 514, 1991, 242, 1994a, 249, 1994b, 209, 1995a, 37-39, 59, 1995d, 134, 2003, 312).

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- <sup>17</sup> See ‘Disenchantment-Reenchantment’ (2011b, 294-295, 297-302). *A Secular Age* has two references to strong evaluation (2007b, 544, 595).
- <sup>18</sup> A point like this has been made by Owen Flanagan, who saw ‘a number of significant modifications in the original picture of strong evaluation as it is used and described in *Sources of the Self*’ (Flanagan 1996, 143).
- <sup>19</sup> See also Taylor’s ‘short handy term’ of naturalism in (1989, 80), his rearticulation of the issue in (1995d, 137), and his most recent description of ‘scientific naturalism’ in (2013, 88, note 15).
- <sup>20</sup> ‘The main lesson to be learned from the linguistic movement, he [Taylor] thinks, is the need for caution in adopting *reductive* modes of analysis. [...] By revealing the complexities of ordinary language, the linguistic philosophers helped to uncover deep problems facing reductionist theories of meaning [...] Taylor would deploy the same strategy when dealing with reductionist analyses of human action put forward by behaviourism’ (Smith 2002, 22). See also Taylor, Charles (with Ayer, A.J.). 1959b. “Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 33:93-124.
- <sup>21</sup> Taylor, Charles. 1959a. “Ontology.” *Philosophy* 34:125-141.
- <sup>22</sup> Taylor, Charles (with Kullman, Michael). 1958. “The Pre-Objective World.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 12 (1):108-132.
- <sup>23</sup> For a more elaborate account of the young Taylor’s engagement with linguistic philosophy and phenomenology, see Smith (2002, 18-34).
- <sup>24</sup> In this respect, Rorty criticizes Taylor for making ‘little attempt to explore the possibility of a *non-reductive* naturalism’ (Rorty 1994, 197).
- <sup>25</sup> Taylor uses these notions interchangeably.
- <sup>26</sup> ‘Here, on the brink of the really interesting question, I have to break off, partly through lack of time; and partly because the conceptual means at my disposal are still too crude to explore this in an illuminating fashion. I hope to return to this at another time’ (2003, 320).
- <sup>27</sup> Note that this is a continuation of the same issue rather than a change of subject. Because Taylor’s phenomenological approach to morality steers a course between phenomenology and ethical theory, the ‘shift’ from ethics to phenomenology in *A Secular Age* is in fact a continuation of the same concern.
- <sup>28</sup> See Kerr (2004) for a complementary reading. Kerr argues that Taylor’s account of morality is a continuation of the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch. He notes that Taylor’s strategy to ‘suspend respect for recent philosophical theories’ sounds ‘very much in tune with Anscombe’s own famous declaration [...] that moral philosophy should be laid aside “at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking”’ (Kerr 2004, 91, 85).
- <sup>29</sup> In this respect, Dreyfus characterizes Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* as ‘the most recent and general version’ of the inner/outer dichotomy Taylor opposes (Dreyfus 2004, 53).
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, (1995e, 2013).
- <sup>31</sup> Taylor nowhere explicitly presents himself as an advocate of moral realism in his key publications. However, in reply to his critics he does admit to be ‘a moral realist’ after all, arguing for ‘a kind of moral realism’ (1991, 246, 243). See also his most recent critique of contemporary epistemology, which is – tentatively, yet boldly – entitled ‘Retrieving Realism’ (2013).
- <sup>32</sup> See, for example Kymlicka (1991, 159), Rorty (1994, 199), Weinstock (1994, 174), and Williams (1990, 9).
- <sup>33</sup> See his concept of ‘moral ontology’.
- <sup>34</sup> See Saurette (2005, 208), Taylor (1989, 5), Smith (2002, 237), Kerr (2004, 96), Laitinen (2008, 15).
- <sup>35</sup> White has certainly understood Taylor on this score, writing that it was not until he encountered the problem that at this level of interpretation ‘many familiar analytical categories and operations become blurred or exhibit torsional effects’ that he came to realize ‘the full significance of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*.’ ‘For example,’ White explains, ‘the more I pondered the relation between ethics and ontology, the more they seemed mutually constitutive at this level and the less possible it seemed to accord one or the other clear primacy’ (White 2005, 14).
- <sup>36</sup> See the quote above on transcendental arguments (1995g, 33).