A phenomenological approach with ontological implications? Charles Taylor and Maurice Mandelbaum on explanation in ethics

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A Phenomenological Approach With Ontological Implications?
Charles Taylor and Maurice Mandelbaum on Explanation in Ethics

Is the attribution of value compatible with the causal explanations of the empirical sciences? Philosophical reflection on this question is polarized between two main approaches: "naturalistic" doctrines that take empirical science as our best guide to understanding reality – including ethics – and "non-naturalistic" views that that see morality as fundamentally autonomous from the empirical sciences. Mainstream criticisms of naturalism emphasize the lack of fit between "natural" facts, on the one hand, and non-natural "moral" facts, on the other, in this way arguing that our values are in clear tension with natural processes and events (Scanlon 1998; Shafer-Landau 2003; Parfit 2011) and/or that we need to adopt a broader type of naturalism to solve the question of their relation (Rorty 1979; 1989; McDowell 1994; 1998; Hornsby 2001).

Against this background, a great deal of recent work in metaethics is devoted either to explaining the discrepancy between natural and moral facts or to reconciling them. The inspiration behind the latter project is that we can have "both our naturalistic view of the world and our moral commitments, in one breadth", that is, "to show how the one can be explained and justified in terms acceptable within the other" (Blackburn 1995, 28, 29). It is clear, however, that this is a one-way street only: we can have both our scientific worldview and our sense of value if, and only if, the latter is explained in terms of the former. This begs the – indeed, very ambitious – question moral philosophers are meant to explore, namely, the question of how to align morality with an adequate ontology.

Yet in the face of this hard problem, even the subtlest non-naturalists are still committed to the view that taking morality seriously requires conceptual analysis and normative theorizing rather than persistent ontological experimentation. As Russ Shafer-Landau puts it, the fact that values do not fit within the natural world may reveal only a *conceptual* – rather than ontological – problem, that is, it "reveals only a limitation on our appreciation of the relevant metaphysical relations" (2003, 86). However, instead of investigating these relations, he argues that there is "no deep explanatory puzzle resisting resolution here", since "people can conceive of many things that are not metaphysically possible" (Shafer-Landau 2003, 86; cf. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014). This restates rather than resolves the issue of what we are committed to ontologically by our values. "Quietistic" views, then, reject ontological debates altogether, that is, they deny the significance of ontological considerations for understanding value by arguing that such considerations are

empty, thereby embracing an "ethics without ontology" (Putnam 2004). David Enoch, on the other hand, seeks to salvage ontological and ethical theory by insisting that his non-naturalism "wears its ontological commitments on its sleeve" (2011, 7). Yet while he continues to stress the intuition that "normative thoughts and truths are so different from natural ones" (2011, 104), his ontological view remains inconclusive:

> Is there anything that can be said here, anything more general, and that does not constitute merely insisting on the just-too-different intuition emphasized already in Chapter 3? Any *positive* argument that can be offered, supporting the irreducibility claim? I do not have such an argument up my sleeve. Indeed, there is some reason to think that we find ourselves here in a dialectical predicament where no such argument is possible (Enoch 2011, 105).[1]

Although such intellectual honesty is admirable, the problem is that neither ignoring nor avoiding nor rejecting nor leaving ontological questions unanswered makes these questions go away. Moreover, there is as much philosophical controversy about how to distinguish between naturalism, non-naturalism, and quietism, as there is about which of these views is correct. Yet it is precisely the strong dynamics of this intramural debate that has lead to a kind of tunnel vision in current moral theory.

With these points in place, what is strikingly refreshing about the hermeneutical philosophy of Charles Taylor is that it moves away from the conceptual framework itself in which the above discussions take place. Although Taylor recognizes that the dispute between naturalists, non-naturalists, and quietists is far from a straightforward discussion, his method involves not so much detailed engagements with mainstream moral theories as the defense of a moral phenomenology that rejects any appeal to scientism in ethics, understood as the application of scientific procedures to areas of our lives in which these procedures do not belong. His views are inspired, first, by an epistemological concern for the nature of human agency in dealing with the problem of knowledge; second, by an ethical concern for the central place of value in human life; and, third, by an ontological concern for the background conditions within which human thought and action take place. However, since Taylor's thinking is organized around an interpretation of the human subject, his hermeneutical vocabulary is somewhat of a mismatch with the analytical discourse in which these issues are generally debated. This may have contributed to some neglect of Taylor's theories, at least within recent metaethical debates. The aim of this paper is to explore the significance of his views for the dispute between naturalists, non-naturalists, and quietists in contemporary metaethics.

Throughout different writings, Taylor touches on the issue of what we are committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments. However, there is always something tentative in his adhesion. His ongoing hesitation about this topic stands in stark contrast to

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[1] In this respect, it is worth noting that Enoch's "metaphysical" chapters 5 and 6 argue *against* what he calls "metaphysically light" views rather than *for* his positive – ontologically not so light – view (2011, 100-150). To be sure, the burden of explaining the ontological implications of non-naturalist moral realism is one of the heaviest in contemporary metaethics. As will emerge, it is highly doubtful that Taylor and Mandelbaum (or anyone else, for that matter) do any better on *that* account.

Taylor's persistent critique of "ethical naturalism" (2003, 306). Although he explicitly presents his counter-argument as an exercise in "moral phenomenology" (1989, 68, 74, 81), he does not provide a clear explanation of the aims, procedures, and results of this approach. It is clear, however, that Taylor explicitly seeks to draw *ontological* conclusions from his moral phenomenology when he says that the "naturalist suppression" of ontological reflection has fostered "a kind of eclipse of ontological thinking" in moral theory, and that we need to rethink human action as part of "a richer ontology than naturalism allows" to undo this suppression (1989, 10; 1995, 39, 185).

Yet it remains to be decided whether Taylor can justify this move from phenomenology to ontology. On the one hand, Taylor's rejection of naturalism seems to steer a course between ethical, phenomenological, and ontological inquiries. On the other hand, he lacks a clear explanation of what can actually be achieved, ontologically, by a phenomenological approach to ethics. This conspicuous silence seems not only due to Taylor's own uncertainties about moral phenomenology but also generally there has been little discussion about this particular method of ethical inquiry in general philosophical debates.[2] In the face of this confusion, I will not only put a spotlight on Taylor's little known paper "Ethics and Ontology" – which, as will emerge, is revealing in all of the above respects – but also have recourse to another neglected source: *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (1955) by Maurice Mandelbaum – which, to my knowledge, is the first and only attempt to develop a systematic and complete moral phenomenology.[3] Against this background, I aim to answer two central questions:

(1) Is Taylor's interweaving of ethical, phenomenological, and ontological claims justified?

(2) To what extent does Mandelbaum's understanding of moral phenomenology help to clarify Taylor's move from phenomenology to ontology?

This paper is divided in six sections. In the first section, I examine Taylor's critique of naturalism in the paper "Ethics and Ontology". I continue to discuss his moral phenomenology in more detail in the second and third sections, arguing that Taylor's move from phenomenology to ontology is problematic. In the fourth section, I evaluate Taylor's strategy by comparing it with Mandelbaum's understanding of moral phenomenology, while also extending this comparison to the issue of how to locate the source of moral experience in the fifth section. Based on these discussions, I finally conclude in the sixth section that Taylor's hermeneutical position, although ontologically incomplete and underdemonstrated, draws attention to a question to which current moral theory does not adequately respond.

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[2] By this I do not mean, of course, that the works of major phenomenological thinkers are not of moral significance, but that inquiry into concrete moral experiences as a specific *method* of philosophical investigation has not generally been part of moral philosophy as practiced in the continental and analytic traditions. It might be argued, though, that recent arguments for Kantian constructivism provide "moral-phenomenological" accounts in so far as they restore an emphasis on common moral experience as the proper source for practical reason and cognition. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[3] I thank Mark Timmons for bringing this book to my attention.

1. Debunking naturalism

The paper "Ethics and Ontology" explicates Taylor's moral-phenomenological approach, his distinctive mode of argumentation, and his dispute with naturalism all in one. The attack on naturalism is a central motivation of Taylor's thought. He has been quite consistent in his definitions of naturalism, although he uses different labels in the course of his writing (describing it either without further qualification, or as "ethical" and "scientific" naturalism). In the present paper, he defines "ethical naturalism" as "the view that arises among thinkers for whom seeing humans as part of nature means seeing their behavior and life form as ultimately explicable in terms that are consonant with modern natural science" (2003, 306). Refuting this approach, Taylor's main concern is that crucial features of human life – especially moral ones – precisely disappear by adopting a scientific stance in general and by making the fact-value distinction a criterion of ethics in particular. This focus emerges early on from the opening of the paper:

> What are we committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments? One common temptation of modern philosophy has been to answer: nothing; moral commitments and factual beliefs are in different spheres (2003, 305).

He then notes that the many attempts to split fact and value have generally been motivated by one central concern, namely, to do justice to what Taylor calls our "post-Galilean" worldview, which stipulates that "value comes into the world with us, the human agents who evaluate" since the universe itself "has been seen as devoid of meaning and value" (2003, 306). Against this background, Taylor's paper picks up his theme of naturalism by arguing that our moral culture sets us the following challenge: *either* we correct our naturalist ontology *or* we must revise the most salient features of our moral experience.

In elaborating on this, Taylor first rejects the views of his favorite opponents John Mackie and Simon Blackburn.[4] He dismisses Blackburn's quasi-realism by arguing that it is a mistake to think that moral values are not "real" because they exist only in crucial reference to our experience of them (2003, 307). And he rejects Mackie's error theory by claiming that there are right and wrong perceptions of human-related qualities, such as the table being red, and not blue. He argues: "It would be quite unwarranted to speak of error here. The (secondary) quality 'red' would not be there if we sighted beings were not part of the universe; but granted that we are, there are right or wrong attributions of it" (Taylor 2003, 307).

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[4] By arguing mainly against the views of John Mackie and Simon Blackburn, Taylor generally uses the term "naturalism" in a rather restricted way, limiting the term to a scientistic form of non-realism. In so doing, he ignores some more recent metaethical views that are both realist and naturalist, as defended by Peter Railton and David Copp. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making me aware of this. However, Taylor's view in *Sources of the Self* that "moral argument and exploration go on only in a world shaped by our deepest moral responses […] just as natural science supposes that we focus on a world where all our responses have been neutralized" seems to rule out any appeal to science for explaining morality (1989, 8). In fact, he argues that "we should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted" (Taylor 1989, 8).

However, Taylor's main point is that the attribution of value is fundamentally different from attributing empirically observable qualities, such as color, in that "questions of *merit* now arise" (2003, 308, original emphasis). That is, we can be asked to demonstrate the "rational grounds" of a normative statement such as "you are dishonest" in a way that we would never be asked to show that the table is really red (2003, 308). The problem for ethical naturalism, Taylor continues, is precisely to account for this "qualitative status of the ethical" that defines our sense of morality; that is, the sense that moral values are "in some way special, higher, or incommensurable with our other goals and desires" (2003, 308, 309). His criticism is, in other words, that naturalists such as Mackie and Blackburn annihilate our sense of value by depicting it as "error" or "projection" on a neutral world (2003, 309). To be sure, this account presents nothing new in Taylor's thought. However, things look rather different when he sets this moral phenomenology *against* naturalist ontology:

> There is a tension between phenomenology and ontology. The former, properly and honestly carried through, seems to show that values of this higher status […] are ineradicable from our deliberations of how to live. But ontology, defined naturalistically, says that properties of this kind can have no place in an account of things in the world (2003, 310).

Here Taylor embarks on a mode of reasoning beyond mere phenomenological description, as he uses his phenomenology as a full-out attack on naturalist-inspired metaphysics. In fact, he heightens the tension by insisting that we must suffer one of two things: the pain of "resisting the phenomenology" or the pain of "challenging the ontology" (2003, 310, 312). For Taylor, the difficulty with views such as Mackie's and Blackburn's is that it boldly decides *beforehand* that everything in nature is to be explained in terms of post-Galilean science, without even formulating it as a basic assumption – let alone arguing for it – and only *then* concludes that values cannot but appear as "queer" or "quasi"-real entities (2003, 311).[5] This begs the question. Refuting this strategy, Taylor urges us to consider that the only real option left is to challenge naturalist ontology. Of course, the very problem of the relation between ethics and ontology would never have come up if we were able to make sense of our strong evaluations exclusively in post-Galilean terms. That would instantly redeem both moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology. However, as Taylor insists, at this point in time such theories are nowhere to be seen (2003, 311).

Ultimately, Taylor does not make any fundamental changes in his view in "Ethics and Ontology". However, this text does press the issue of naturalism even more than in previous writings by putting a spotlight on the yawning gap between what we "really" experience about ourselves and what we "really" believe to be true about the world. This move is crucial. For this is the moment at which Taylor the *phenomenologist* steps aside in favor of Taylor the *ontologist*. Or, perhaps better put, this is the point at which it becomes clear that these are not two different figures but one and the same.

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[5] It might be argued that the fact-value dichotomy that underpins Mackie's and Blackburn's positions has a much broader reach than just naturalistic views. In this respect, it is telling that even a *non*-naturalist such as Enoch characterizes normative truths as those that "fall on the ought side of the is-ought distinction, the value side of the fact-value distinction" (2011, 1).

On closer inspection, though, it would seem that Taylor's attempt to connect phenomenological and ontological points is more a tentative suggestion than a daring philosophical thesis, as his paper breaks off with the comment that his thoughts on this topic are "still too crude to explore this in an illuminating fashion" (2003, 320). This apologizing note clearly illustrates Taylor's philosophical predicament. On the one hand, he is strongly convinced that naturalism is on the wrong track. On the other hand, he is still lacking a more fitting explanation of the relation between ethics and ontology for himself.

2. Taylor's moral-phenomenological predicament

In the following sections, I will show that Taylor is walking into very uncertain territory by drawing ontological conclusions from his phenomenological approach to ethics. The crucial point is this: he wants to reject a naturalist conception of morality and to refute naturalist ontology *at one stroke* by having recourse to moral phenomenology. We can illustrate Taylor's predicament by looking at the distinctive way in which he develops this critique. His leading question is: If moral phenomenology demonstrates (1) that incommensurably higher goods exist and (2) that their experienced source does not come from human experience alone, then "where" do our strong values come from? This question, as Taylor understands it, can be answered adequately only by taking into account the *ontological* conditions that allow for the experience of higher values. He argues:

> Put simply, our moral reactions suppose that they are responses to some reality, and can be criticized for misapprehension of this reality. […] We can't just say that explanations of why we experience these meanings are irrelevant to their validity; that they stand on their own, because we *feel* them strongly. Our attributing these meanings makes a stronger claim. It lies in their nature as strong evaluations to claim truth, reality, or objective rightness (2011, 297-298, original emphasis).

This means that, unlike the classical example of Edmund Husserl, who proposed that in practicing phenomenology we ought to bracket the question of the existence of the world around us, Taylor insists 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" (2007, 607) right back on the agenda. In fact – and this point is essential – he argues that his phenomenology of moral experience is allied with a *realist* ontology. Although Taylor nowhere explicitly presents himself as an advocate of moral realism in his key publications, he has admitted, as he puts it, to be "thinking of myself as a moral realist", arguing for "a kind of moral realism" (1991, 246, 242).

Methodologically speaking, however, Taylor wants to have it both ways by adopting this hybrid position. His moral-phenomenological critique of naturalist ontology 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 ethical intuitions. This causes a central problem in what is perhaps best described as Taylor's "moral realist phenomenology": How to align his initial phenomenological starting

point, which departs from introspection, with his claims about the ontology *outside* our moral experience? Put differently, what, if anything, are we committed to ontologically by Taylor's moral phenomenology?

Many commentators accept Taylor's moral phenomenology, but seem to lose track of what he is trying to do along the ontological axis of his thought.[6] As Bernard Williams brilliantly puts it: "From a strong base in experience, Taylor very rapidly moves uphill, metaphysically speaking" (1990, 48). For Williams, to extrapolate ontological claims from facts about moral experience is to "freight the moral consciousness with demands that it can not only live without, but has lived without quite successfully" (1990, 48). That is, Taylor's ontological urge goes "a long way beyond what, in its first steps, it rightly said was necessary to any moral consciousness at all" (1990, 48). Paul Johnston sees more than an argumentative sleight-of-hand in this move from phenomenology to ontology, arguing 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" (1999, 105).

The central worry, it would seem, is not that Taylor's phenomenology necessarily turns to the subject and its interiority, but that he also makes a move "outwards", raising the issue of the ontological underpinnings of morality. These simultaneous phenomenological and ontological perspectives are equally constitutive of Taylor's moral philosophy, as he has been concerned with *both* phenomenological description of moral experience *and* the more metaphysically sensitive question of what it is that implicitly informs and directs this experience. By adding this extra question, Taylor moves – tentatively, yet boldly – beyond the bounds of phenomenology. His "predicament", then, is that he fails to make clear how ontological features, otherwise beyond phenomenology's reach, can become visible by adopting his distinctive non-naturalist moral phenomenology.

3. How to understand Taylor's problematic move "uphill"?

As has been noted, Taylor's moral phenomenology is primarily a critique of Mackie's error theory and Blackburn's quasi-realism. Rejecting the idea that value simply flows from our natural desires, he opposes any view that sees value as coming from our human responses to a neutral reality. More particularly, Taylor refutes the underlying belief that everything which is real must be explained from the "objective, third-personal perspective that natural scientists adopt" (2015, 15, note 16). For this is exactly what his moral phenomenology seeks to make clear we cannot do, arguing that "there remains the tension between the phenomenology of the incommensurably higher and a naturalist ontology which has difficulty finding a place for this" (2003, 316). From here it is only a small step to the more explicit rejection of what Taylor describes as "the ontology we allow ourselves as post-Galilean naturalists" (2003, 319).

The problem, then, is that Taylor does not present his view as a challenging phenomenological description of morality in the face of naturalistic explanations – as his method obliges him to do – but rather seeks to *extend* his critique by challenging a naturalist

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[6] See, for example, Kymlicka (1991, 159), Rorty (1994, 199), Weinstock (1994, 174), and Williams (1990, 48).

conception of ontology. Yet because his phenomenological approach does not allow for such a rapid move "uphill", Taylor ultimately tries to validate his ontological critique by simply *presupposing* the superiority of his phenomenological approach.

Criticizing this move, Frederick Olafson explains convincingly that this tactic begs the question. In his view, Taylor tries to settle his rejection of naturalism in ethics by "a species of *phenomenological fiat*" (Olafson 1994, 194, italics mine). As Olafson understands Taylor, difficulties arise not only from his conception of higher goods, but also from his non-anthropocentric notion of "a 'demand' that is made on us by the world – a demand that 'emanates from the world' and not just from ourselves" (Olafson 1994, 194).[7] Olafson's problem with these formulations, then, is that "the language of 'demands' and 'emanation' is nowhere shown to have a more secure basis in moral phenomenology than does that of 'projection'" (Olafson 1994, 194). These points indicate that Taylor criticizes naturalism on behalf of a non-anthropocentric understanding of morality that mandates him to do so, yet without offering an explanation or argument for the superiority of this phenomenological perspective.

I think Olafson is on to something important here, namely, a tension between Taylor's human-focused phenomenological approach to ethics, on the one hand, and his non-anthropocentric ontological claims, on the other. Taylor's predicament can therefore be rephrased as the condition that his simultaneous rejection of naturalism and endorsement of "a kind of" moral realism on the basis of his phenomenology commits him to a *non-naturalist realist ontology* about which he says very little in its defense. And yet, he is in no doubt that the data of moral experience, properly understood, must in the end be aligned with an overall ontological view:

> The question can arise whether the values we espouse can be supported on the basis of the ontology to which we want to subscribe. Maybe […] that would take us beyond the bounds of a naturalist ontology. The battle between phenomenology and ontology would break out again (2003, 318).

These statements suggest that Taylor somehow seeks to extrapolate claims about *metaphysical* reality (ontology) from facts about *human* reality (phenomenology), as his view indicates that only a metaethical view that is both non-naturalist and realist can account for the full scope of moral experience. As he says elsewhere, the issue is "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" (2007, 609, italics mine). But even if we acknowledge that Taylor seeks to make room for his ontology by describing it as a third alternative between "a 'Platonist' mode of moral realism" and "mere subjectivism" or "projectivism", he has still to show how we gain access to this area at all (1994, 210-211).

Although I think Taylor's attack on naturalist ontology is interesting and promising, his sudden move from phenomenology to ontology is underdemonstrated. At the same time, however, we should not gloss over the fact that he willingly admits that his reasoning is "still

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[7] The quotations are from Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989, 523).

too crude" to explore this complex issue in an illuminating fashion, at least in his paper "Ethics and Ontology" (2003, 320). Yet when Taylor finally does return to the issue at the end of *Retrieving Realism* (2015), he again arrives at a rather modest conclusion. Despite there being "good reasons, moral and intellectual, to press forward and attempt a unification of perspectives", he explains that we cannot but acknowledge that "there remain deep differences of basic ontology" (2015, 167-168).[8]

The real problem is that Taylor does not really accept these differences. In this respect, we might recall his view that our moral reactions "track some reality" and can be *criticized* for "misapprehension" of this reality (2011, 297). Unlike the humbler goal of phenomenological clarification, these are claims about understanding our world *correctly*, that is, ontologically speaking. Therefore, considering that both phenomenological and ontological claims are central to Taylor's position, the problem still remains what ontology can support his non-naturalist moral phenomenology.

4. Methods from Mandelbaum

So far, I have argued that having recourse to moral phenomenology by itself does nothing to validate ontological claims. However, the fact that the interwoven tactic that is supposed to secure Taylor's position, has, as he says, both a "phenomenological moment" *and* establishes a kind of "realism" (1994, 209), suggests at least that there is more at stake than just some conceptual confusion. Yet, as I will argue, things look rather different when confronting Taylor's moral phenomenology with Mandelbaum's explanation of this distinctive method. Even though Mandelbaum's phenomenological project shows a striking overlap with Taylor's approach to ethics, Taylor does not mention Mandelbaum in any of his writings, and also generally, there seems to have been some neglect of Mandelbaum's theories.[9]

Mandelbaum's *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* consists of three main tasks. The first is "to show the necessity for grounding any ethical theory upon a phenomenological analysis of moral experience" (1955, 7). The second is "to analyze the nature of that experience and of the moral controversies to which it gives rise" (1955, 7). The third and final aim is to argue that "one can discriminate between those moral judgments which are valid and those which are not" (1955, 43). In the remainder of this paper, I shall concentrate on only two aspects of Mandelbaum's view to evaluate Taylor's move from phenomenology to ontology, namely his explanation of the methodological restrictions of moral phenomenology and his clarification of the source of moral experience. As will emerge, moral phenomenology, as Mandelbaum envisages it, is simply the wrong method to use to defend ontological claims. Yet at the same time, he agrees with Taylor that moral demands are not explicable simply in terms of human responses, as they emanate from sources beyond

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[8] When asked about the ontological implications of strong evaluation during a seminar at the University of Leuven, Belgium (2 June 2015), Taylor again demonstrated a strong sense of caution and hesitancy with regard to ontological problems, explaining that "there is a highly debatable meaning of what you have to assume to be able to talk in this domain."

[9] Some exceptions are Christopher Lloyd (1989), Ian Verstegen (2000; 2010), the latter a collection of essays about Mandelbaum's work, and Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2005), who develop their "cognitivist expressivism" in crucial reference to Mandelbaum's moral phenomenology.

our desires and inclinations. As will emerge, this raises some crucial questions about the metaethical position Taylor means to defend.

For present purposes, the most significant parallel between Taylor and Mandelbaum is that they both refuse to isolate moral phenomenology from other fields of inquiry. In this respect, Mandelbaum makes it clear that his endorsement of a phenomenological approach to ethics is "not to deny that the results of an ethical inquiry must also be consonant with metaphysical, psychological, and sociological theses" (1955, 31). In elaborating on this, Mandelbaum makes a connection between what he calls the "metaphysical" approach to ethics and his own phenomenological approach. As it turns out, his explanation of this connection is highly instructive for coming to grips with Taylor's move from phenomenology to ontology.

The metaphysical approach to ethics, as Mandelbaum defines it, is characterized by what can be called a "top-down" structure, as it seeks to "discover the nature of a *summon bonum* or of a standard for moral obligation through recourse to a consideration of the ultimate nature of reality" (1955, 16). At first, Mandelbaum defends the metaphysician's attempt to connect reality and value against the charge of the naturalistic fallacy – to confuse "what is" with "what ought to be" – because, as he says, "no matter where we start, we must in the end reconcile our conceptions of value and of obligation with what we conceive to be true of the world" (1955, 17). That this is so, Mandelbaum explains, that the goods we value must ultimately be aligned with our conception of reality, emerges from "the fact that we prize that which strikes us as being real – not sham, illusion, mere artifice, or appearance – *because* it is real" (1955, 17, original emphasis). As we have seen, Taylor makes a similar move by arguing that "our best phenomenology" must in the end be aligned with an "adequate ontology" (2007, 609). However, in Mandelbaum's view, one major weakness of the metaphysical approach is that reference to the nature of ultimate reality by itself does nothing to validate a system of ethics. To make this point, he explains that the metaphysical approach to ethics is "not self-sufficient" as its validity must be "tested" through an appeal to moral common sense, in this way arguing that *any* metaphysical ethics must in the end be aligned with moral phenomenology (1955, 17-18).

In other words, to be convincing, a *metaphysical* ethics needs to be supported by *moral-phenomenological* evidence. In fact, Mandelbaum continues, moral phenomenology deserves to take priority over the metaphysical approach in that it "starts from a point which all paths must eventually cross: a direct examination of the data of men's moral consciousness" (1955, 30). Methodologically speaking, this means that the procedure of moral phenomenology is best understood as "bottom-up", as opposed to the top-down structure of metaphysical approaches to ethics, as the phenomenological method states that "a solution to any of the problems of ethics must be educed from, and verified by, a careful and direct examination of individual moral judgments" (1955, 31). On the whole, Mandelbaum concludes, although the phenomenological approach dictates that the proper basis for any normative claim is to be found in moral experience, this does not mean that moral-phenomenological results have no implications for other fields of inquiry: "All that the phenomenological approach demands is that the solution to the problems of ethics must not be dictated by a prior acceptance of hypotheses drawn from the other fields" (1955, 31).

Therefore, he adds, there is "no ultimate opposition between a phenomenological approach to ethics and a willingness to connect the results of ethical inquiry with non-ethical hypotheses" (1955, 32).

Mandelbaum's reasoning here almost perfectly articulates the concern for the connections between philosophical areas that is central to Taylor's interwoven line of thought. Moreover, Taylor implicitly follows Mandelbaum by arguing – against naturalism – that we should not let our language be dictated by the commands of science in making "the best sense of our lives" (1989, 57), then also more particularly by criticizing Mackie and Blackburn for begging the question by explaining values away as queer and quasi-real entities.

However, Mandelbaum and Taylor are of different minds on the question of *how* moral phenomenology connects with other fields. As we have seen, Taylor's distinctive move "uphill" clearly states that (bottom-up) phenomenological approaches *must* eventually cross (top-down) metaphysical ones when reflecting on the drawbacks of error theory and quasi-realism. Yet for Mandelbaum, this move reaches beyond the method of moral phenomenology. Reflecting on this issue, I will show in the next section how Taylor and Mandelbaum ultimately disagree on the issue of whether moral phenomenology can be used to infer ontological claims about morality.

5. The source of moral experience

A central element of Taylor's and Mandelbaum's views is that they emphasize the special nature of moral goals in comparison with other, non-moral goals. Given Taylor's understanding of ethics as involving values that are "higher or incommensurable with our other goals and desires" (2003, 308), the merit of Mandelbaum's account is that it illuminates *why* moral goods are experienced as being higher than simple preferences. As he explains, "in some choices we feel that one of the alternatives places a *demand* upon us, that we are obliged, or bound, to act for it", that is, in a way that strikes us "not as a preference but as an 'objective' demand" (1955, 50, original emphasis). In Mandelbaum's view, the element of demand is something many moral philosophers take for granted. In this way, he explains, "most deontological theories have taken the element of a direct moral demand as being a phenomenon which is not capable of further analysis" (1955, 51). However, one of the greatest achievements of both Mandelbaum and Taylor is that they provide a phenomenological analysis precisely of this central element in our moral experience. Echoing Kant, both authors are clear about the desire-independent nature or "objective feel" of moral goods. Mandelbaum defines moral demands as essentially "objective" and "independent of preference, inclination or desire", while Taylor adds they therefore "represent standards by which these desires and choices are judged" (Mandelbaum 1955, 57; Taylor 1989, 20). Mandelbaum then goes one step further when he asserts that "it is impossible adequately to describe this feeling without taking into account what appears to us to be its *source*" (1955, 55, italics mine). In this respect, he notes that

> […] the demands which we experience when we make a direct moral judgment are always experienced as *emanating from "outside" us*, and as being directed against us.

They are demands which seem to be *independent of us* and to which we feel that we ought to respond (1955, 54, italics mine).

Mandelbaum holds two positions here. First, objective demands are real, not a façade. As he says, "we prize that which strikes us as being real […] *because* it is real" (1955, 17, original emphasis). Second, these demands are a class in itself, not some human projection onto the world, as the felt demand in moral situations is such that "it appears to place a demand upon us because of *its* nature, not because of ours" (1955, 60, original emphasis). Taylor makes the same point in terms of his central concept of "strong evaluation" when he says that "there is something objectively right about this response" because "this response genuinely motivates us, it is not simply a cover, or a rationalization, or a screen for some other drive" (2011, 300).

Taylor's and Mandelbaum's clarifications of the human-transcendent source of moral experience fly in the face of the naturalistic view that value comes into the world with us, as a function of how we as human agents operate. For Taylor, then, this moral phenomenology only sets the stage for his more controversial idea that, although moral demands make sense only in *relation* to us, this does not mean that they are necessarily *dependent* on us, ontologically speaking. This feeds into the twofold explanation that moral demands appear only *within* human experience, but that we come up against a human-*transcendent* reality within this experience. Here Taylor's interwoven line of thinking emerges in full force, as this explanation starts from phenomenology and ends in metaphysics.

At first glance, this is where the assumed philosophical affinity between Mandelbaum and Taylor seems to unravel. From Mandelbaum's perspective, Taylor is making a crucial methodological mistake by inferring ontological claims in elaborating on the source of moral experience, because this move contradicts the very purpose of the moral-phenomenological method, namely, to investigate "the data of men's moral consciousness" – and these data alone (Mandelbaum 1955, 30). Because of this starting point, moral phenomenology (as Mandelbaum defines it) is necessarily limited to "the phenomenal world", that is, that which is "directly experienced by me or by others" (1955, 313, note 18). This means, as he clarifies, that both the "origin of an experience or object" and a discussion of "its ontological status" are principally "excluded from phenomenology" (1955, 313, note 18).

However, when elaborating on the source of objective moral demands, Mandelbaum is in no doubt that such demands are, as he puts it, "emanating from 'outside' us", as they are experienced as being "independent of preference, inclination, or desire" (1955, 54, 57). In my view, this observation is not only spot-on, but also makes a cogent and convincing case for Taylor's contention that these demands take us beyond ourselves. Taking this argument to its final conclusion, this means that a more promising type of moral phenomenology would indeed involve an inquiry into the ontological conditions under which moral judgments are made. Surprisingly perhaps, these considerations support rather than weaken Taylor's move from phenomenology to ontology.

6. Conclusion

This brings us right back to the topic with which we began: Taylor's attack on naturalist ontology. In the end, he refuses to draw a sharp distinction between phenomenology and

ontology precisely because explanations of value as our "error" or "projection" on a neutral world do not seem fit in the light of the human-transcendent nature of moral demands. However, even if Taylor is quite right to argue that the "naturalist suppression" of ontological reflection has fostered "'a kind of eclipse of ontological thinking" in moral theory (1989, 10; 1995, 39, 185), then what could it mean to *undo* this suppression? Or, to put it in Mandelbaum's terms, where does a bottom-up phenomenological approach to ethics eventually cross a top-down metaphysical one in reflecting on the source of moral experience? This is where Taylor's question of how to align our best phenomenology with an *adequate* ontology emerges in full force.

In the end, it remains quite difficult to spell out Taylor's position in sufficient detail in order to enable it to be "translated" into mainstream metaethical vocabulary.[10] However, his rejection of Mackie's and Blackburn's views together with his explicit "Dancy-like" move from claims about "the nature of moral experience" to claims about "the probable nature of the world" (Dancy 1998, 232) put Taylor squarely in the terrain of non-naturalist moral realism. His twofold strategy can then be rephrased as, first, phenomenologically describing moral experience in a way that demonstrates the distinctive realist purport of that experience; and, second, arguing that the only metaethical view that is compatible with such purport is a non-naturalist realist ontology.[11]

This means that for Taylor, the costs of embracing either an error theory or a quasi-realist view are simply too high. Yet he agrees with Mackie at least, that moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology are in tension. For this reason, he rejects Blackburn's project of "finding room" for ethics within the natural world (Blackburn 1998, 49) as one that tries to "make non-realism *compatible* with moral experience by making this experience somehow *irrelevant* to it" (Taylor 1989, 60, original emphasis). However, he cannot accept Mackie's conclusion that facts and values simply lie in different realms either. As he argued recently, such a conclusion "requires the additional assumption that moral or value statements aren't really 'factual'; and this begs all the crucial questions in this domain" (Taylor 2016, 194, note 14).

But if this critique rules out non-realism, non-cognitivism, and naturalism, and if Taylor's realism is identical with neither Platonism nor the more recent forms of non-naturalism and quietism, the question we need to ask is: What type of position is left? In other words, since Taylor rejects "Platonist" modes of moral realism (1994, 210-211), naturalism, and non-realism, he is committed to thinking that there is room for a non-Platonic and non-naturalist form of moral realism. For Taylor, it is clear that reason in this domain cannot but be "hermeneutical" since there are no "knockdown arguments" in making sense of human action (2016, 211, 217). In fact, this is precisely what makes value problems amendable to hermeneutical inquiry. As we have seen, the thrust of Taylor's moral phenomenology is (just as in the original context of textual interpretation) to clarify a *particular* feature of our action – in this case moral experience – within the presumed overall

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[10] I explain Taylor's arguments in his own terms – yet in far more detail – in Meijer (2017a; 2017b) and Meijer (forthcoming-a; forthcoming-b). That is, I argue that his distinctive mode of argumentation steers a course between Aristotelian and Murdochean ethics, Kantian epistemology, Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology, and Heideggerian ontology.

[11] I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who suggested such a translation.

meaning of the *whole* – in this case the broader ontological context within which our actions take place. As Taylor's attack on naturalism makes plain, this hermeneutical tactic ultimately consists in the *phenomenological* clarification of moral experience for the *ontological* purpose of examining the metaphysical implications of our values.

Yet this raises a major question that neither Taylor nor Mandelbaum addresses in sufficient detail: If for Taylor and Mandelbaum the main point is that we need to take due account of the human-transcendent nature of moral demands if we are to hold on to our moral experience, then what are the implications of this phenomenology for the *metaphysical* order in which we are set? Put differently, what is the ontological status of values that are human-*related* insofar as we feel their appeal, but not human-*controlled* as they principally offer standards of conduct?

Although Taylor's hermeneutical approach is bound to disappoint those seeking knockdown arguments, he nonetheless manages to raise the important question whether we understand fully the meaning of "the whole", that is, the meaning of the ontological framework that makes our actions understandable. Yet even if Taylor argues that our experience as moral agents should lead us to correct the implicit naturalist ontology in our self-understanding, as a hermeneutist, he has no problem in acknowledging that it is perfectly possible to argue in the other direction as well. As Taylor explains, the challenge of the notorious "hermeneutical circle" is precisely to *balance* potential arguments in *both* directions into an equilibrium in which one makes "maximum sense" of the issues involved (2016, 218).[12]

It would seem, however, that Taylor's hermeneutics could claim only a partial success in "enriching" ontological theory so as to align it with moral experience, as his moral phenomenology argues mostly negatively for the *non*-naturalist ontological status of our values. In this respect, Taylor's tentative suggestion that we might be in need of a stronger ontological foundation for our moral beliefs than naturalist ontology can provide is a question rather than a statement. Nonetheless, given that most moral philosophers are reluctant to embrace naturalism fully and yet remain highly skeptical of all things that do not fit the naturalist model, Taylor's suggestion certainly deserves further investigation.

Taylor's and Mandelbaum's moral-phenomenological approaches are illuminating examples of how to investigate this complex issue, as their views go hand in hand with a stance of openness with regard to the ontological implications of ethics. One can accept that there is no single true ontology that makes sense of our moral experience while still affirming that moral statements are directed no less than scientific statements by norms of truth, reality, and objective rightness, even in spite of the recognition that the connection between ethics and ontology is always open to reinterpretation. Taylor's contribution to this debate, then, is that he shines a spotlight on the major metaphysical challenge for anyone willing to take morality seriously:

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[12] Intriguingly, the upshot of this hermeneutical reasoning is that Taylor is open to the naturalist realist views of Peter Railton and David Copp after all, which argue in the "other" direction to the extent that they seek to account for the realist purport of moral experience from within a naturalist perspective. Unfortunately, Taylor does not elaborate on this.

> Many of our contemporaries, while they remain quite unattracted by the naturalist attempt to deny ontology altogether, and while on the contrary they recognize that their moral reactions show them to be committed to some adequate basis, are perplexed and uncertain when it comes to saying what this basis is (Taylor 1989, 10).

This problem, I conclude, is one that contemporary metaethics should start taking far more seriously. That is, we should neither ignore it to salvage naturalist ontology (Mackie, Blackburn) nor avoid it in favor of metaphysical non-naturalism (Cuneo, Shafer-Landau) nor suppress it on the basis of quietistic considerations (Putnam, Parfit) nor leave it unexplained in arguments for non-naturalist realism (Enoch, Taylor).

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