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# Retrieving Realism in Social Imaginaries

## 1 Introduction

We have seen in the previous chapter that social imaginaries are, in Taylor's view, knit closely together with implicit moral and spiritual orientations. These implicit orientations are constitutive of our strong evaluations and come to the fore through articulation. But once, as strong evaluators, we get hold of the constitutive goods of these evaluations, difficulties arise concerning their (ontological) nature. Why is it so that we experience these constitutive goods as commanding our awe and respect? Is there any objective ground for our constitutive goods, or are they the result of our subjective projection of value on our actions and onto the world? As Taylor puts it:

I want to speak of strong evaluation when the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire. That is, they are seen as goods which we ought to desire, even if we do not, goods such that we show ourselves up as inferior or bad by our not desiring them. (Taylor 1985, 120)

This excerpt exhibits to a large degree the same structure as the argument from Plato's *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro, the argument goes around the central question: are customs and laws of piety good because the gods desire them, or do the gods desire them because they are good? Analogous to this question, Taylor raises the issue of the ontological nature of constitutive goods: are they good because we desire them, or do we desire them because they are intrinsically, that is, objectively good?

Plato's dialogue ends up in an *aporia*: the issue remains undecided, though the argument tends, of course, in the direction of an objective ground for piety, in line with Plato's realist position concerning the world of Ideas. The excerpt above seems to suggest that Taylor also tends towards a realistic solution of the objectivity-subjectivity dilemma. With regard to constitutive goods, our desire of them is secondary to the intrinsic goodness of these goods.

But to make things clear right away, Taylor does not advocate realism in the Platonic style. Instead he defends what he and Hubert Dreyfus have recently called "pluralistic robust realism" (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 131–168). Robust plural realism can be interpreted as holding the middle between a naive and supposedly natural form of realism, on the one hand, and different strands of

relativism and projectivism, on the other. In order to elucidate this position, we need to take a closer look at how Taylor distinguishes scientific reality from moral reality. Instead of simply arguing about whether the distinction between ‘objective’ empirical facts and ‘subjective’ moral values is valid or not, he tries to draw attention to the fact that the actual opposition lies between the perspectives of science and ethics.

We elaborate on this in the next section (2), in which we analyze Taylor’s remarks on the difference between scientific and moral objectivity. Since moral experience, according to Taylor, entails both subjectivity and objectivity, we then proceed with a section (3) on how this dichotomy showcases itself in the tension between ontology and phenomenology throughout Taylor’s work. In the next section (4), we see how this tension is received in the secondary literature, and we confront Taylor with some methodological problems. Although the notion of *social imaginaries* is never far away in any of these sections, we make the connection between moral experience and social imaginaries more explicit in our last section (5).

## 2 Scientific and Moral Objectivity

A good starting point for analyzing Taylor’s realism is his distinction between scientific and moral objectivity, as it comes to the fore in this quotation from *Sources of the Self*:

It is widely thought that no constitutive good could have such a fragile ontological foundation as this, a niche simply in our best self-interpretation. Unless it is grounded in the nature of the universe itself, beyond the human sphere, or in the commands of God, how can it bind us? But there is no a priori truth here. Our belief in it is fed by the notion that there is nothing between an extra-human ontic foundation for the good, on the one hand, and the pure subjectivism of arbitrarily conferred significance, on the other. But there is a third possibility, the one I have just outlined, of a good which is inseparable from our best self-interpretation. (1989, 342)

The fragility Taylor speaks of in the first line refers to “ordinary fulfillments of human beings” (1989, 341), which have significance and even make “a universal demand such that, for instance, I may be called upon to work for a future world in which these fulfillments will be maximized” (1989, 341). Our constitutive goods are always fragile, because they figure in our “best self-interpretation.” As a result of this, they are subjective: there is always the possibility that in the process of our self-interpretation as moral agents, we will discover moral sources that bind and commit us more deeply than the sources we were previ-

ously attached to, and unmask the latter as illusions. But in spite of their fragility, constitutive goods still have an *ontological* foundation, in that they appear to us as *objectively binding*. This is not just the case at the level of individuals: these constitutive goods also lie at the base of what scaffolds our social imaginaries, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

So for Taylor the hermeneutics of moral self-interpretation through strong evaluation lay bare constitutive goods that entail both a subjective and an objective dimension. The crux of the argument is how we should understand the relation between these two dimensions. We will dwell further on this in the next section. But before deepening the *relation* between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ with regard to morality, or ‘phenomenology’ and ‘ontology’ throughout Taylor’s work, we must first explore what these terms mean for Taylor, in the context of human moral experience.

What is the nature of moral concepts? How do elements of subjectivity and objectivity play a part in our use of moral concepts? In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Bernard Williams (1985, 132–155) argues that we all use ‘thick’ moral concepts such as cowardliness, gratitude, generosity, and – why not – piety. These concepts are called thick because they say something substantial about the world we experience. The use of these concepts is informed by some form of perception of qualities in the world. We must perceive certain actions and a certain situation in the world as corresponding to, for example, cowardliness. In other words, some feature of reality justifies our use of that concept. We cannot arbitrarily project thick moral concepts on any situation in the world. This means that thick moral concepts are to some degree world-guided. But they are also action-guiding: when I call someone a coward, I distance myself from their actions, and will perhaps avoid contact with that person in the future, or else try to convince them to change their behavior. Thick moral concepts therefore involve both a descriptive and a prescriptive element. Moreover, these two dimensions cannot be torn apart. I cannot meaningfully say: “Cowardliness is bad. I regret that.” Using certain thick moral concepts implies that one is familiar with both their descriptive and their evaluative components.

Now, Taylor follows Williams in his analysis of so-called thick moral concepts, but their ways seem to part when it comes to thin moral concepts. We now move to the more abstract level of meta-ethics. According to Williams, thin moral concepts such as good or just evidently cannot be linked to a situation in the world. They lose their world-guidedness or convergence with some state of affairs in the world. This makes meta-ethics different from science, and from scientific objectivity. In science, one can have recourse to meta-theories that can explain and justify why a certain scientific theory no longer holds. For example, perceptions about sunrise and sunset can be replaced by a Copernican

theory of our planetary constellation. This new theory can also explain why former assumptions have now been proven to be false. According to Williams, there is no hope of ever achieving something similar for meta-ethics. Hence, meta-ethics rests on loose ontological foundations. Meta-ethics introduces a language game that has no direct sources in reality. As human beings, we determine by convention what we call good or just. We can learn what goodness or justice consists of only by entering the moral language game of a certain culture.

Taylor is not willing to make such a conclusion, however. With meta-ethics, we are at the level of what he calls ‘constitutive goods’ and ‘moral sources.’ These are not thin, abstract entities that we can define at our own will, subjectively or intersubjectively, in convention and deliberation with others. As we have seen, constitutive goods do not abandon some form of objectivity or ontological foundation, however fragile that foundation may be. Rather, our strong evaluations are ‘strong’ because they involve what we are most strongly committed to, because they appear to us as objectively binding. We admire certain constitutive goods for what they are, and do not value them because we desire them. Constitutive goods are seen by Taylor as ‘normative for desire.’

As has become clear from the quotation above, Taylor wants to avoid two extreme positions of reductionism when it comes to the explanation and justification of morality: reductions to ontology in a naturalist guise on the one hand,<sup>1</sup> and reductions to different forms of projectivism on the other hand.<sup>2</sup> Naturalism has become increasingly popular in recent decades, a naturalist ontology reducing all human activity to biology. We use moral concepts, articulate strong desires and admire constitutive goods because we are biologically programmed to find the best strategy to cope with our surroundings.

Projectivism does not reduce moral experience to the objectivity of nature, but to the subjectivity of human language. We project moral categories onto the world, either voluntarily or involuntarily. “Involuntary” projectivism (1989, 54) is in fact some form of naturalist reduction: we cannot help projecting values onto the world, since it is in our human nature to do so; however, upon closer scrutiny we must recognize that our projections do not react to ontological features in the world, but are merely subjective projections. This line of argument has prompted some philosophers, such as Simon Blackburn, to articulate their projectivist position as quasi-realism: moral concepts remain so important

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1 In *Retrieving Realism* (2015, 160) Dreyfus and Taylor further distinguish between reductive and scientific realism. Reductive realism holds that the sciences can explain all modes of being, whereas scientific realism claims that all users of “natural kinds” terms must use these terms in correspondence with the scientific use of the terms.

2 Here Dreyfus and Taylor (2015, 160) mention Rorty’s “deflationary realism.”

that, for their proper functioning, we should continue to believe in their objectivity, even though, upon theoretical reflection, we must admit that they rest only on subjective projections.

Taylor reacts to these arguments with his *ad hominem* argument. The sceptic and relativist arguments we see deployed in projectivism do not match human experience. According to Taylor, we are in need of a phenomenology of human moral experience. What is involved in this particular type of phenomenology is explained in the paper *Explanation and Practical Reason* (1995a). In this paper, Taylor seeks to undermine the naturalist conception of morality as a human projection on a neutral world by defending our commonsense moral reactions. In so doing, he refers to John McDowell, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Bernard Williams as his most important allies:

The opposition to this naturalist reduction has come from a philosophical stance that might in a broad sense be called ‘phenomenological.’ By this I mean a focus on our actual practices of moral deliberation, debate, understanding. The attempt is to show, in one way or another, that the vocabularies we need to explain human thought, action, feeling, or to explicate, analyze, justify ourselves or each other, or to deliberate on what to do, all inescapably rely on strong evaluation. (...) It tries to show us that in all lucidity 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)<sup>3</sup>

He calls the appeal to our actual moral experience the “ad hominem mode of practical reasoning,” a logic that in Taylor’s view is “central to the whole enterprise of moral clarification” (1995a, 37). However, as he continues, it is precisely the inclination of “the naturalist temper, with its hostility to the very notion of strong evaluation (...) to make the ad hominem argument seem irrelevant to ethical dispute” (1995a, 59). Here we see Taylor expressing his most central concern from yet another angle: While most people remain quite unattracted by the naturalist attempt to invalidate basic moral responses – because on the contrary their moral reactions strike them as being right in a fundamental way – they can anxiously doubt whether, say, a strong sense of disgust at killing innocent people can really be justified. The naturalist, then, typically encourages the idea that this is a reasonable kind of doubt indeed; they do so by arguing that simply showing that we in fact experience a deep commitment to certain moral goals proves nothing about what we ought to do. To put it in classical philosophical terms, to invoke our moral experience when deciding issues of practi-

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<sup>3</sup> The reference to McDowell, MacIntyre, and Williams is in note 7 of Taylor’s text, after his assertion “that this case has been convincingly made out, in a host of places” (1995a, 39).

cal reason is to commit the notorious naturalistic fallacy, falsely deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is.’

In Taylor’s view, however, this charge is flawed, because it is based on a crucial misunderstanding of the nature of moral goals. This brings us to Taylor’s Kantian image of morality, which states that something is not a moral goal simply by virtue of the fact that we are *de facto* committed to it, but because it lays claim to us and calls for our commitment. Obviously, the fact that I have a strong desire – for example, for vanilla ice cream – does nothing by itself to show that I ought to desire it. But in Taylor’s view, this is-ought objection is simply beside the point, as it affects only our weakly evaluated goals, not those we recognize as moral. As we have seen in the previous chapter in the section about strong evaluation, the crucial point of Taylor’s understanding of morality is the fact that we experience some of our desires and goals as more significant than other goals and desires. It is these goods that really matter to us as agents, that is, they determine the degree of fulfillment in our lives. Because of this, I identify myself by these strong commitments in such a fundamental way – and this is the main thrust of the argument – that I cannot really reject them in the full sense. If, for some strange reason, I suddenly stopped caring about people drowning (or being murdered, or tortured, or raped) I cannot simply shrug my shoulders and say that I do not ‘feel like’ drowning victims today. To do so would seem to us both awfully strange and terribly frightening.

In contrast, I do not think of my desire for vanilla ice cream in these terms. If, for example, I feel more like strawberry ice cream today, yesterday’s preference for vanilla ice cream simply would no longer have a claim on me. In the case of strong evaluations, however, the fact that I identify with a diversity of strongly valued goods does nothing to reduce their respective claims. As Taylor puts it: “While some goals would have no more claim on us if we ceased desiring them, such as my present aim to have a strawberry ice cream cone after lunch, a strongly evaluated goal is one such that, were we to cease desiring it, we would be shown up as insensitive or brutish or morally perverse” (1995a, 37).

This gives us an anchor for practical reason without committing the naturalistic fallacy, Taylor believes, because “in the second case, we would have demonstrated that we can’t be lucid about ourselves without acknowledging that we value this end” (1995a, 37). In other words, in the case of strongly valued goals my deep commitments indeed show that I ought to desire these goods, because without them, I would lose the very possibility of being an agent in the full sense. We would see this as pathological. It comes as no surprise, however, that all this cannot be made intelligible from a naturalist perspective that takes only our weaker, *de facto* desires as the ultimate in justification of our actions.

Taylor calls “the imagined agent of naturalist theory (...) a monster” (1989, 32). He therefore counters the objection of the naturalistic fallacy by convincing us that the charge can be made only on a highly distorted picture of a human being, one which insists that human agents cannot be motivated by anything stronger than mere impulse. In the light of Taylor’s rivaling portrait of a strong evaluator, however, it is not a fallacious but an essential feature of humans that they are able to derive ‘oughts’ from their experience as moral agents. On this picture, a life that lacks the strong evaluations by which we give sense to and live our lives will be lacking in humanness. Analogous to personal life, social imaginaries without implicit or explicit strong evaluations could not bear any real significance for our lives. In this respect, social imaginaries need to be real in order to become meaningful, and not vice versa. What really matters and is to some degree objective or universal, determines what is meaningful to us as human beings.

But does this argument really escape a circular structure? Is the objectivity of morality for Taylor not located in human experience, and therefore in subjectivity? The question about the ontological nature of the objective foundation for morality remains open. Does the objectivity lie in some external reality that is independent of human subjectivity, or can the ontological objectivity of moral experience be located only within the (universal) structures of human subjectivity? Part of the answer lies in the following quotation:

It seems to me that the various theories of moral judgements as projections, and the attempts to distinguish ‘value’ from ‘fact,’ fall afoul of this BA [best account] principle. In fact we find ourselves inescapably using terms whose logic cannot be understood in terms of this kind of radical distinction. If we live our lives like this, what other considerations can overrule this verdict?

Of course, the terms of our best account will never figure in a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. This is the complement to the anti-Aristotelian purge of natural science in the seventeenth century. Just as physical science is no longer anthropocentric, so human science can no longer be couched in the terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with. (Taylor 1989, 58–59)

In other words, since science and ethics are radically different approaches to reality, they must be looked at in their own right, as they analyze, clarify, and evaluate human life in their own separate ways. Furthermore, this means that although the distinction between facts and values is crucial to the scientific

enterprise, it simply does not hold in the realm of ethics, because our moral concerns can neither be understood as neither ‘crude’ instinctive reactions nor as ‘sophisticated’ involuntary projections or mere historically contingent conventions. However, as we will see in the following sections, this conclusion has important implications for moral theory. In fact, what emerges from Taylor’s rejection of externalist conceptions of morality and the fact-value dichotomy that underpins naturalist and projectivist approaches, is that we are in need of a wholly different approach to ethics, an approach that avoids ‘naturalist’ and ‘subjectivist’ reductions of ethics alike. After having analyzed a few excerpts from *Sources of the Self*, we now turn to the development of Taylor’s thought in his entire oeuvre. The tension between ontology and phenomenology is present throughout his work. Our analysis of this tension will shed new light on the issue of the foundation of morality and social imaginaries.

## 3 Taylor Between Ontology and Phenomenology

### 3.1 Exploratory Remarks

Throughout his different writings, Taylor touches on the issue of what we are committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments, but there is always something tentative in his adherence. The problem of how ethics and ontology are related is evoked in all the key publications on strong evaluation and constitutive goods (*Philosophical Papers*, *Sources of the Self*, *Philosophical Arguments*) and are called to mind once more in *A Secular Age*; but it is not explored extensively in any of these works.

On the one hand, it therefore seems clear that Taylor views this question as a valuable one. On the other, he never fails 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 forward the connection between ethics and ontology 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>4</sup> The same issue is raised in *A Secular Age*, in which Taylor asserts

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<sup>4</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)

that one of the greatest challenges for ethics is “the issue of how to align our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology” (2007, 609).<sup>5</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 really put to work only in these late,<sup>6</sup> 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, non-anthropocentric 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 the “transcendental” levels of Taylor’s project, while adding that “it is not

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<sup>5</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>6</sup> The latest and most explicit of which is Dreyfus and Taylor 2015.

always clear where Taylor's philosophical anthropology ends and where his philosophical history starts" (Smith 2002, 7–8).

### 3.2 A Phenomenological Method with Ontological Implications

It would seem, therefore, 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 our 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>7</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:

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<sup>7</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).

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>8</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” (2007, 609). It would seem, therefore, that unlike Husserl’s phenomenology, Taylor’s moral phenomenological investigations indeed have certain ontological implications.

### 3.3 Commenting on Taylor

The previous section ended with what may seem an oxymoron: an ‘anthropocentric ontology’ or a ‘non-anthropocentric phenomenology.’ But it has become quite clear by now that Taylor is quite ambivalent in his use of both ‘ontology’ and ‘phenomenology.’ 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>9</sup> On the other hand, he has been skeptical 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; 1959, 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), and therefore

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<sup>8</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>9</sup> See for example Taylor 1995a, 2013.

a re-embedding of phenomenology in social imaginaries. 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).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, 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” (2007, 607) right back on the agenda. In fact, he argues that his phenomenology of moral experience is allied to a realist ontology.<sup>11</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,’ with 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 right 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 ours). 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-endedness that characterizes both texts: He dismisses the

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**10** Taylor’s commitment to an embodied form of phenomenology is confirmed in Dreyfus and Taylor (2015, 133–39 and 164–66), where they praise Samuel Todes for his phenomenological account of *balance*. A human body can only find balance in finding a posture which is adapted to both objective features of reality (e.g. gravity) and subjective intentions.

**11** 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). For Taylor’s recent point of view on realism, see Dreyfus and Taylor 2015.

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.

Many of Taylor's commentators praise him for his phenomenological account of moral experience,<sup>12</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 concern, 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 nowhere is it clarified – either by Taylor or 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 we have seen in the previous sections, 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, as we have also seen in the previous chapter: "Transcendental arguments (...) prove something quite strong about the subject of experience and the subject's place in the world; and yet

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12 See for example Kymlicka 1991, 159; Rorty 1994, 199; Weinstock 1994, 174; Williams 1990, 9.

since they are grounded in the nature of experience, *there remains an ultimate, ontological question they can't foreclose*" (1995b, 33, italics ours).

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 does one 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?

Of course, in separating Taylor's ontological investigations from his philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology, we are "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>13</sup> Yet we think that making these distinctions will add some clarity, or at least uncover fundamental difficulties. In so doing, however, we are 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 a contradiction in synchronizing philosophical anthropology and ontology. As he writes 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

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<sup>13</sup> See his concept of moral ontology.

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,” whereas 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>14</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that his commentators, like Taylor himself, do not take a great 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 takes 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 our 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 we mentioned earlier, between Taylor’s methods of philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology, on the one hand, and his defense of moral realism, on the other. Rather than rate these on a par, we want to push beyond this and criticize Taylor at this point.

In our 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. Essentially, our point is that you can account for a large part of Taylor’s work without invoking the word ‘ontology’ at all. There is some-

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14 See Saurette 2005, 208; Taylor 1989, 5; Smith 2002, 237; Kerr 2004, 96; Laitinen 2008, 15.

thing 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" (1994, 209), suggests at least that there is more at stake than merely some conceptual confusion. As we noted above, simply charging Taylor with idiosyncrasy or conceptual mistreatment is beside the point. It's not as if you could simply solve the issue by having recourse to a more conventional vocabulary.<sup>15</sup> And yet, at the level of transcendental justification, Taylor is open to the charge that philosophical anthropology and moral phenomenology are not the correct methods to use in defense of ontological claims. To conclude this 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>16</sup>

## 4 The Ontology of Social Imaginaries

In the previous sections, we have analyzed Taylor's clarification of the difference between the scientific explanation of reality and the explanation of moral experience. We have seen that Taylor, in his elaboration of this distinction, refutes narrow understandings of both ethics and ontology. We have also seen how Taylor himself cannot overcome certain methodological problems: the ontological backing of moral experience is argued for with transcendental arguments that do not escape human experience. The interplay between phenomenology and ontology therefore seems to exhibit the same circular structure as the Euthyphro dilemma. Moral phenomenology points to an objectivity that raises ontological questions, but in Taylor's understanding of the concept, ontology can never be completely disentangled from human experience. Can we now draw a parallel between moral experience and social imaginaries?

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**15** 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).

**16** See the quotation above on transcendental arguments (1995b, 33).

Our claim is that we can, because Taylor's notion of social imaginaries is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, closely linked to notions such as strong evaluation and constitutive goods. Social imaginaries flourish within an expressive culture. Having exposed Taylor's conceptual apparatus of social imaginaries in chapter 2 and Taylor's tentative remarks about ontology in this chapter, we are now ready to compare Taylor's use of social imaginaries with the original use by Castoriadis.

In the previous paragraphs, we observed that Taylor, in a way, fights fire with fire when it comes to his criticism of a naturalistic ontology. Reducing moral experience to biology indeed testifies to a rigid ontology of materialism. But in order to save the phenomena of moral experience, Taylor also has recourse to an ontology of the human, or a kind of ontologized philosophical anthropology. It seems, therefore, that Taylor proposes a homeopathic therapy for reductionist ontology, albeit that the remedy for a naturalistic ontology is to be found in a hermeneutic ontology – which is, after all, of a different nature. With his homeopathic treatment, he seems to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds: he substitutes (hermeneutic) ontology for (naturalist) ontology. He wants to do justice to the experience of objectivity in human moral experience, starting with a moral phenomenology, which is to a very large degree historical, a historicity to which the second part of *Sources of the Self* testifies. But then the issue of ontology is never far away, and Taylor is always eager to develop arguments that point to transcendental structures of human experience.

As we have indicated, Taylor has never fully articulated his thoughts on this fundamental tension,<sup>17</sup> and seems to avoid the issue systematically whenever it turns up in his writings. But there may be very good reasons for Taylor not to choose between either phenomenology or ontology. We will make this clear by comparing Taylor's use of social imaginaries to Castoriadis's conception.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Castoriadis developed his notion of social imaginaries to redefine the political and the social. According to Castoriadis, the social was always approached in an essentialist fashion, from ancient Greek philosophy to Marxism. Castoriadis's purpose was to launch a notion of the social that was more dynamic, more historical, and without the articulation of an essentialist purpose of history. So we could argue that Castoriadis chose the side of radical historicity and therefore, rephrased in the vocabulary we have employed in this chapter, of moral phenomenology.

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<sup>17</sup> As already indicated, Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) may seem to offer their 'final' words on this issue in *Retrieving Realism*. However, the tension between subjectivity and objectivity is not resolved here either – and for very good reasons, as we shall see below.

But Taylor warns us to be vigilant for two types of reductionism. On the one hand, reducing social (and moral) experience to historicism denies certain transcendental structures that shape the way we can live our times at the level of experience and think about our social organization at the level of social and political theory, though admittedly always in a certain historical context. So historical reductionism tends to lose sight of its own ontological foundations. That history would be ‘all there is’ is a metaphysical assumption that cannot be justified in purely historical terms.

On the other hand, an increasingly popular material reductionism nowadays holds sway which reduces the richness of (moral and social) human experience to biology. This is a new and powerful deterministic ontology, which in fact denies historicity altogether, by reducing it to material, biological conditions.

To sum up our comparison of Taylor and Castoriadis, we could state boldly that Castoriadis seeks to escape ontology in the guise of essentialism in favor of historicity, whereas Taylor wants to retrieve Castoriadis’s view by pointing to inescapable transcendental and thus ontological features of human experience, however problematic this retrieval of realism may be.

The reason for Taylor to keep subjectivity and objectivity together in analyzing moral experience cannot be separated from his conceptions of expressivism, art and religion. ‘Objective’ sources for morality, art and religion can still resonate within human experience, but they come to being only through subjective expression and appropriation. In this way, with regard to moral experience, Taylor makes objectivity and subjectivity ultimately interdependent. The same accounts for his approach to social imaginaries. We also need *subtle languages* to articulate the social imaginaries we live in and by: their historical features as well as the ‘ontological,’ transcendental level that shapes these imaginaries. To give just two examples: in the Western world, we all share the social imaginary of the free market. Even if we oppose it at an ideological level, we take part in it by our inevitably acting in it as consumers. Or to take freedom of speech as another example: even if we discuss the limits to freedom of speech in the wake of terrorist attacks in France, no one participating in the Western social imaginary is serious about discarding freedom of speech altogether. Freedom of speech shapes our social imaginary at a transcendental level to the same extent as certain radical interpretations of the Koran or sharia law shape the imaginary of certain radical Muslim groups, although the latter ‘ontologize’ their social imaginary in an essentialist way, in what Taylor has called a ‘closed world structure.’

The previous chapter has already indicated the struggle needed to come to terms with our social imaginaries. Plural as they are, the danger of violence and conflicting social imaginaries is always lurking. But we have also seen

that Taylor is rather optimistic about the chances of a pluralistic dialogue between social imaginaries. After all, he is a romantic thinker, trying to reconcile the subjective and objective dimensions of moral experience, and the historical and transcendental features of social imaginaries. Hence it may be wise to retain the Euthyphro-dilemma between the subjective and objective foundations of morality open. For all the differences between Platonic realism and Taylor's hermeneutic approach of objectivity, Taylor, like Plato, seems to arrive at a fundamental *aporia*. And, as we have seen, Taylor has very good reasons to call the tension, for now at least, irresolvable.

Yet Taylor remains a romantic who continues to believe in some kind of reconciliation. He fully admits this in the text *Apologia pro libro suo*, his afterword to the book *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*: "(...) I plead guilty as charged: I'm a hopeless German romantic of the 1790s. I resonate with Herder's idea of humanity as the orchestra, in which all the differences between human beings could ultimately sound together in harmony." (Warner et al. 2010, 320)

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