

# THE PERSONAL LIVES OF STRONG EVALUATORS: Identity, Pluralism, and Ontology in Charles Taylor's Value Theory<sup>1</sup>

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Both in political theory and in ethics, discussions of pluralism are haunted by an opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. Claims of subjectivity -- of individual identity, personal tastes, and diverse ways of life -- are construed as conflicting with claims of objectivity -- of morality, impartiality, and the Good. Debates then center on which should be given primacy, or how to manage a detente between the two, say, by setting aside a "private" domain where subjectivity has free rein. But the underlying dichotomy generally goes unquestioned.

What is thus particularly appealing about the work of Charles Taylor is his attempt to resolve the opposition itself by arguing that subjectivity and objectivity are essentially intertwined in the realm of value. On the one hand, the modern self can determine its authentic identity only by engaging with subject-transcending sources of value. On the other hand, one's access to such values is only possible through the ongoing attempt to make sense of one's ineluctably subjective experience of the way in which things *matter*. The modern self both relies on "sources" beyond itself and represents, in another sense, a source itself. Hence the double meaning of the title, *Sources of the Self*.<sup>2</sup>

This entwinement of the subjective and the "subject-transcending" seems to provide Taylor with a way of arguing for the objectivity of values while remaining a staunch defender of political and ethical pluralism. Both are central commitments. He is firmly committed to

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<sup>1</sup>In preparing this essay, I have benefitted greatly from discussing earlier drafts with Bert van den Brink, Rainer Forst, Joseph Heath, Pauline Kleingeld, Thomas McCarthy, William Rehg, Marc Slors, and Carl Wellman.  
<sup>2</sup>*Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) [hereafter cited in the text as "*Sources*"]. Taylor's concern with resolving the tension between the subjective and the objective is particularly explicit in his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Herder's notion of a "measure" unique to each individual,<sup>3</sup> and his political philosophy is centered on the claim that a good society is one that ensures the availability of adequate resources -- cultural and institutional, as well as material -- for a rich diversity of individual forms of meaningful self-realization.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he consistently opposes monistic attempts to reduce the "diversity of goods" to a single, overarching principle.<sup>5</sup> And yet he has been also been a tireless critic of subjectivism with regard to value, a stand that has been further underscored by his formulation of his anti-subjectivism in realist terms (most prominently, in *Sources*).

But the balance here is delicate. Indeed, I shall be arguing that, despite his explicit commitment to the diversity in personal commitments and ways of life, his appreciation of the importance of toleration for intercultural understanding,<sup>6</sup> and his continued emphasis on themes of authenticity, self-understanding, and identity, Taylor's endorsement of value pluralism is in tension with the *ontological* character of his value theory.

This seems to be a fairly widespread worry, often formulated as a charge that Taylor has slipped into a Platonist metaphysics of the Good.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, by mistakenly charging Taylor with "Platonism," many discussions miss both the subtlety of Taylor's ethical realism and precise character of his difficulties. The specific difficulty that concerns me here has to do with the tension between Taylor's ontological account of value and what I shall

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<sup>3</sup>"The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (rev. ed.), ed. A. Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 30; see also *Sources*, 375.

<sup>4</sup>See especially, "Atomism," and "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in *Philosophy and Human Nature*, 187-210, 211-29; "The Politics of Recognition"; and "Irreducibly Social Goods" and "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 127-145, 181-203, respectively.

<sup>5</sup>For a particularly adamant statement of Taylor's opposition to value monism, see "Reply to Braybrooke and de Sousa," 125. See also, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 230-247.

<sup>6</sup>"Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 of *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116-133.

<sup>7</sup>Numerous reviews of *Sources of the Self* raise this worry in variety of ways, often with rather caustic comments on the possible role Taylor grants to God within this ontology. See Quentin Skinner, "Who Are 'We'? Ambiguities of the Modern Self," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 133-153; Judith Shklar, "Review of *Sources of the Self*," *Political Theory* 19: (1991): 105-109; Ronald de Sousa, "Bashing the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*," *Dialogue* 33 (1994): 121; and Russell Hittinger, "Critical Study: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*," *Review of Metaphysics* 44 (Sept. 1990): 125. The argument is also made that Taylor is either not enough of a Platonist or is, in fact, not a realist at all. See, respectively, Stephen R. L. Clarke, "Taylor's Waking Dream: No One's Reply," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 195-215; and Hartmut Rosa, "Goods and Life-Forms: Relativism in Charles Taylor's Political Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* no. 71 (May/June 1995): 22-26.

call the "individuating role of personal commitments."<sup>8</sup> This is the idea, central to Taylor's account, that the contingent fact that some projects, relationships, and ideals have greater personal importance for me than for others is part of what individuates me as the unique individual I am [e.g., *Sources*, 30]. And the question I wish to pose is this: How is this crucial pluralistic notion of something having special value *for me* (and not for you) to be squared with the *general* prescriptive and motivating character that Taylor attributes to goods?

In what follows, I begin by sketching Taylor's basic approach to practices of evaluation (specifically, to his concept of strong evaluation) and his non-Platonist but ontological account of the objectivity of value. I then turn in the third section to the central tension just mentioned, that between pluralism regarding what has personal significance, on the one hand, and objectivity regarding standards of worth, on the other. In the subsequent two sections, I consider Taylor's two central strategies for resolving this tension: first, narrative justification as reasoning in transitions and, second, articulation of goods as a matter of capturing their "personal resonances." I argue that each of these ultimately falls short, and I conclude by tracing the sources of the difficulties with Taylor's approach and considering some possible modifications.

### ***Critical Reflection, Self-Interpretation, and Independent Standards of Worth***

Taylor's concept of strong evaluation incorporates three central aspects: (a) taking a reflective attitude toward one's motivations for acting; (b) interpreting that attitude as well as one's situation; and (c) employing an interpretive vocabulary that involves non-subjective distinctions of worth. Each of these aspects warrants brief elaboration, especially the third.

(a) Drawing on Harry Frankfurt's discussion of "second-order desires,"<sup>9</sup> Taylor

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<sup>8</sup>To counter the voluntaristic connotations of the term "commitments," it should be emphasized that what is meant here is a rather complex manner of being constituted so as to find certain projects, relationships, and ideals deeply important. This has been developed well by Harry Frankfurt: see his "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," in *Vernunftbegriffe in der Moderne: Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress 1993*, ed. H.F. Fulda and R.-P. Horstmann (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 433-47.

<sup>9</sup>"Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge

presents strong evaluation as the defining capacity of persons to examine critically their desires and to determine whether they *want* (at a "second-order" level) to have those desires. In place of passive acquiescence to their desires, strong evaluators take an active stance toward those desires -- either condemning them or endorsing them. To engage in strong evaluation, then, is to grapple with the question of whether one wants to be the sort of person who is moved in the way one finds oneself being moved.

(b) As is suggested by this talk of a struggle to get clear about one's motives, Taylor conceives of practical reflection as an activity, specifically as an ongoing process of *self-interpretation*. There are several reasons for taking such an approach. It not only avoids the errors of a Cartesian model of reflection, in which the ego relates transparently to itself;<sup>10</sup> it also captures the important sense in which one may deliberate not only about whether to perform a certain action, but whether to engage in an action with a particular attendant self-understanding, such as visiting a sick relative out of concern for his well-being (rather than out of concern for one's self-righteousness).<sup>11</sup>

This move to an interpretive approach has an important consequence within Taylor's account, for it opens up a *transformative* dimension of strong evaluation. Taylor argues that -- like much that is constitutively interpretive, such as novels or sculptures -- motivations are open to being reinterpreted in ways that transform them.<sup>12</sup> A person may come to see, for example, that her indignation is better understood as envy, or that her urge to leave her

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University Press, 1988), 11-25. On the relationship between Frankfurt and Taylor, see my "Wünsche zweiter Ordnung, Starke Wertungen und intersubjektive Kritik: Zum Begriff ethischer Autonomie," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 42 (1994), 97-119.

10For a compelling formulation of the relevant arguments here, see Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, trans. Paul Stern (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), esp. lectures 3, 4, and 7.

11See "Self-Interpreting Animals" and "Theories of Meaning" in *Human Agency and Language*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45-76 and (esp.) 262, respectively; "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" and "Neutrality in Political Science," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 15-57, 58-90. See also, Michael Stocker's Aristotelean discussion of acting "for the sake of a friend," in his "Values and Purposes: The Limits of Teleology and the Ends of Friendship," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 747-65.

12See, e.g., *Sources*, 34; "Theories of Meaning," 270-3; "Self-Interpreting Animals," 64-74; "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language*, 35-40; and "Charles Taylor Replies," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 219-22. Due to constraints of space, I will not be able to discuss Taylor's important and controversial claim that many of the motivations and emotions that are the object of strong evaluation are partly constituted by the way in which they are interpreted. For a critical discussion, see Richard Moran, "Making Up Your Mind: Self-Interpretation and Self-Constitution," *Ratio (New Series)* 1 (1988): 135-151.

present job for a new life in Nepal may be motivated less by an adventurous spirit than by a lack of resolve and self-confidence in the face of a tenure evaluation. Since what one feels here is bound up with how one understands the *import* of one's feelings, these re-interpretations rarely leave the motivational state unchanged.

Significantly, Taylor goes on to make the further claim that, because this process of self-interpretation and self-evaluation is in principle unending, the possibility of transformative re-interpretation opens up a realm of individual "responsibility for self," a responsibility to continue to strive for a deeper and better understanding of oneself.<sup>13</sup> Since we can never close off the hermeneutic process arbitrarily without risking shallowness or inauthenticity, it seems that what gives an individual's (constitutively interpretive) identity any stability at all can only be that, as in the case of a poem or painting, the interpretations involved stand up to scrutiny. But even then, there is no final stopping point, for every interpretation is subject to further challenge.

(c) This constructivist emphasis might suggest that we can just invent ourselves. But this is an idea that Taylor adamantly rejects as failing to acknowledge the third dimension of strong evaluation, the way in which our strong evaluations are constrained by standards that are not of our own choosing. In its weakest formulation, this is the claim that because progress in self-interpretations is bound up with making value-laden discriminations, such as that between envy and indignation, that are only available in language, our use of these terms is governed by rules of linguistic intelligibility.<sup>14</sup>

But Taylor usually means the constraints of "intelligibility" to apply in a stronger sense, as fixing the limits of what actions, choices, and patterns of valuation we can possibly render intelligible. The point is that it is only by finding ourselves "always already" within some "horizon of significance" that we can distinguish between what is significant and insignificant. To deny the existence of such constraints -- to claim that "people could

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13"What is Human Agency?" 39-42.

14On the importance of evaluative terms, see, e.g., "Theories of Meaning," 261-2; and "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 116-23. Cf. Iris Murdoch's discussion of "secondary moral concepts," in "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 1-46; and Bernard Williams's discussion of "thick ethical concepts" in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), esp. ch. 8.

determine what is significant, either by decision or perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly by just feeling that way" -- would be, in Taylor's words, "crazy":

I couldn't just *decide* that the most significant action is wiggling my toes in warm mud. Without a special explanation, this is not an intelligible claim.... What could someone *mean* who said this? But if it makes sense only with an explanation (perhaps mud is the element of the world spirit which you contact with your toes), it is open to criticism....Your feeling a certain way can never be sufficient grounds for respecting your position, because your feeling can't *determine* what is significant...."<sup>15</sup>

Strongly evaluative claims must be conceived of as arguable, as open to being disputed and defended intersubjectively. And it is a short step from here to Taylor's stronger claim that "strong evaluation...involve[s] discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" [*Sources*, 4].

It is at this point that we can grasp Taylor's distinction between "strong" and "weak" evaluation. To a first approximation, what separates them is that while strong evaluation involves a *principled* rejection or endorsement of a way of being moved to act ("principled" in the sense that it is not reducible to a *contingent* conflict with another motive), weak evaluation is generally a matter of expedience or degrees of desirability. For example, to introduce a variation on Frankfurt's well-known example,<sup>16</sup> imagine a drug addict who has a (second-order) desire to stop wanting another "fix" because her addiction happens to conflict with other desires -- such as affording a comfortable apartment or composing great music. Although reflective, she is evaluating only *weakly*.<sup>17</sup> The strongly evaluating addict, by contrast, finds her cravings base and her inability to take hold of her life cowardly; furthermore -- and herein lies the distinction -- the strongly evaluating addict would reject

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<sup>15</sup>*The Ethics of Authenticity*, 36. Elizabeth Anderson puts this point concisely: "Our capacities for articulating our attitudes depend on our understandings of our attitudes, which are informed by norms for valuation." (*Value in Ethics and Economics* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993], 5.

<sup>16</sup>Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will," 17.

<sup>17</sup>This is not to deny that weak evaluation has its place in the life of strong evaluators. Taylor does claim, however, that the capacity for strong evaluation is a crucial feature of full human agency, though I shall not be able to treat this claim here. See Martin Löw-Beer, "Living a Life and the Problem of Existential Impossibility," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 217-236. In what follows, I shall assume that it would be very hard for most of us not to be. Thus, references to "strong evaluators" will be very inclusive.

her desire *even if she could feed her habit and still pay her rent or write her music.*<sup>18</sup>

In order to make judgments of this kind, Taylor argues, one needs to be able to employ certain "qualitative distinctions" as to the *worth* of certain desires and goals. Only by appealing to subject-transcending standards of what makes something "cowardly" or "base" rather than "courageous" or "noble," does it become possible to understand our experiencing some desires and goals as *deserving* to be endorsed or rejected. But what is the status of the subject-transcending standards in virtue of which they deserve this?

### ***Taylor's Account of Objective Value: Ontological but not Platonist***

At this point, further clarification is needed regarding the *ontological* terms in which Taylor formulates his anti-subjectivistic account of value. This brings us back to the charge that, in speaking of coming into "contact" with "transcendent" and "nonanthropocentric" "moral sources" such as Nature or God, Taylor is committed to an outdated Platonic conception of the Good. For purposes of examining whether Taylor's ontological approach provides the basis for an adequate theory of *value*, the central worry seems to be that, in opting for Platonism, Taylor has taken on board a notion of objectivity with dogmatic implications, for it suggests a single, timeless set of moral truths to be discovered. This dogmatic conception of objectivity, it is thought, is fundamentally at odds with the history of shifting value-conceptions and the imperatives of cross-cultural toleration. Given that Taylor himself is deeply committed to avoiding ahistorical dogmatism of this or any sort, this is a serious charge.

But the dismissal of Taylor as a Platonist is off the mark, and it is important to understand why if we are to understand the deeper difficulties with his theory of value and his concept of strong evaluation. To begin with, it is worth noting that Taylor himself explicitly and consistently criticizes Platonism. As a matter of historical contingency, he argues, "We are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meaning is an impossibility" [*Sources*, 512], and in this sense at least, "Platonism is dead."<sup>19</sup> But Taylor also

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<sup>18</sup>"What is Human Agency?" 21.

<sup>19</sup>"Comments and Replies," *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 248; and "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994): 210].

views Platonism about value as fundamentally mistaken in its assumption -- which it shares, oddly, with naturalism -- that something can be deemed real only if it can be shown to part of the same world that is revealed by inquiry into a human-independent reality. In this way, according to Taylor, "Platonism and the natural science model are...objectively allied in creating a false picture of the issue of moral goods."<sup>20</sup>

Taylor's approach, by contrast, aims to steer a course between projectivism and standard forms of realism by arguing that, at least for goods such as courage and dignity, what is *real* is what is "inseparable from our best self-interpretation" [*Sources*, 342; see also 58-9, 68-74]. Once we reject the assumption shared by Platonism and naturalism, it becomes possible to argue that such goods are objectively *real* even though they are bound up with how we experience the world and our situation in it.<sup>21</sup> On a parallel with non-foundationalist approaches in philosophy of science, Taylor's position is that what is real is what our best theories (or, as he says, "best accounts") tell us is real.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, and consistent with his general hermeneutic-phenomenological insistence on the importance of understanding the human world from the perspective of *lived experience*, Taylor argues that with regard to certain practices and experiences that are central to the fabric of our lives, the only way to make sense of them is by making claims about what is real -- for example, claims about redness or sunsets -- even if this does not fit into detached, naturalistic accounts of the world.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>*Sources*, 56. See also 69, 73f., 342, 372, 427f., and esp. "Comments and Replies," 245-9. Cf. S.L. Hurley, *Natural Reasons: Personality and Polity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 14f.

<sup>21</sup>In this sense -- though probably only in this sense -- Taylor might actually be understood to be advocating a form of "response-dependent" realism about value, a term first introduced by Mark Johnston in his "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 63*, 139-174. See also, *inter alia*, Philip Pettit, "Realism and Response-Dependence," *Mind* 100 (1991): 587-626; Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 87-137; John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J.L. Mackie*, ed. T. Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 110-129; and Crispin Wright, "Moral Values, Projection, and Secondary Qualities," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 62*, 1988. Cf. the discussion of "sensibility theories" by Stephen Darwall, Alan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, in their "Fin de siècle Ethics: Some Trends," *The Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 152-65.

<sup>22</sup>*Sources*, 57-9, 68. For an excellent overview, see Arthur Fine, "Unnatural Attitudes: Realist and Instrumentalist Attachments to Science," *Mind* 95 (1986): 149-79.

<sup>23</sup>See "Overcoming Epistemology" and "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8-13 and 20-33, respectively.



In the context of Taylor's concept of strong evaluation, the experiences from which we must always start out are what I shall term our "*affective-conative responses*" to situations.<sup>24</sup> These include the full spectrum of ways in which we find ourselves moved in response to situations -- from the sense of compassion evoked by the face of a child in pain to the feeling of reverence felt toward unspoilt wilderness. And it is in the attempt to make sense of these experiences and their import, on Taylor's view, that the ontological vocabulary of goods emerges as crucially important: "Ontological accounts have the status of articulations of our moral instincts. They articulate the claims implicit in our reactions" [*Sources*, 8]. In part, this is a claim about, say, wilderness areas being the bearer of a real *property* such as worthy-of-reverential-treatment [*Sources*, 68]. More central to Taylor's concerns, however, is the idea that goods -- both "life goods" and "constitutive goods"<sup>25</sup> -- are something real that we appeal to and that inspires us.

Central to Taylor's ontological account of value, then, is the claim that in actively seeking to make sense of their affective-conative responses to situations, strong evaluators necessarily find themselves appealing to standards of value and treating them as having a certain ontological status. Indeed, what defines Taylor's approach as ontological is the fact that what supports our most basic evaluative intuitions is not an underlying principle of reason or even an overarching value or set of values that trumps all others but rather an understanding of how the world is. There are two distinctive features of this ontological status within Taylor's account that are worth highlighting.

First, Taylor speaks of goods not just as part of our best accounts of our affective-conative responses but also in a language that highlights the way in which (in his view) goods are experienced as having a certain ontological independence: not only do values

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<sup>24</sup>The term "affective-conative response" is meant to capture the broad range of subjective elements that are the object of a person's self-interpretation.

<sup>25</sup>Taylor draws a distinction between the widely varying "life goods," in virtue of which a life is worthy or valuable [*Sources*, 63], and "constitutive goods," which "stand behind" life goods [*Sources*, 93]. Since (a) this is not a foundationalist distinction and thus (b) there is no standpoint from which to say that a particular good is a constitutive good rather than a life good that only appears to be beyond further backing, and (c) both are justified by appeal to what makes the most sense of our lived experience, I shall be speaking for the most part simply of "goods," understood as a continuum between these two sorts (with "hypergoods" -- to which Taylor no longer refers -- somewhere in the middle.)

*move* us and *empower* us to act; we try to get "access" to them or get "closer" to them [e.g., *Sources*, 91-98, 310, 338]. Of course, all of this is part of how we *experience* goods, and thus the contrast with Platonism remains. But by characterizing goods in terms of these sorts of relationships to judging agents, Taylor suggests a model within which someone who was *not* moved by these goods gets conceived as failing to connect with something real and as blind to something objective. More strongly, if articulating the point of my experience is central to what it is to be a self-interpretive agent (and a strong evaluator), and if this articulation is geared toward identifying the appropriateness of my affective-conative responses and doing so in ontological terms, then in doing so I am implicitly articulating something that others should feel too.

The generality of the constraints on appropriate responses (and thus on choices, which are justified in light of these responses) is underscored, second, by the rather strong stand Taylor takes against relativism. Taylor is right, I think, to reject as pragmatically incoherent forms of relativism according to which judgments about goods are justified only *from my perspective*, as a function of my being the person I am, such that unless you share my form of life, you are in no position to challenge my perceptions of value. This includes even those forms of "sophisticated naturalism" that view "our valuations as among the perceptions of the world and our social existence which are inseparable from our living through and participating in our form of life" [*Sources*, 67 (he mentions Bernard Williams)]. This emphasis on the ontological and thus *shared* basis for judgments about the good clearly indicates that the way that the import of one's affective-conative responses (and the resulting claims about what is significant) are *general* in character.

But one can also evaluate a choice as good *for you* though not for me in an objective sense, such that you might be able to show me wrong. We can take a claim such as "living close to nature has enormous value for me, as a component of my life," and we can argue about the truth of that claim. This seems like a plausible position for a realist about value to take. The question is, *can Taylor take it?*

In fact, it seems unclear that he can, in part because he conceives of evaluative disagreements not as disputes about the *validity of claims*, but rather as something more akin

to *perceptual divergences* or even as *differences in proximity to goods*. Recall that, on Taylor's view, determining what is valuable is of a piece with determining what goods are real, in Taylor's sense of being central to the best account that can be given of the import of one's affective-conative responses. So what would it mean for me to say that something is good *for me* but not for you? On Taylor's account, it would seem to mean that it is part of my reality but not part of yours. But, to borrow from Wittgenstein, this is a decidedly "ungrammatical" sort of thing to say about what is real, as Taylor's own rejection of relativism suggests. The problem is that, though we seem to know perfectly well what we mean when we say that something might be "*valuable* within the context of my life," on Taylor's approach, this gets translated into something that is very difficult to make sense of. For what could it mean for something to be "*real* within the context of my life"? And what are the consequences of this view for the issue, mentioned at the start of this essay, of whether Taylor's ontological approach is in harmony with his strong pluralistic commitments regarding conceptions of the good life?<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Individuating Role of Personal Commitments***

We now turn directly to the question of how well Taylor's ontological account of values is able to accommodate what I have referred to as the "individuating role of personal commitments," the idea that it is both constitutive and distinctive of my individual identity that certain projects, relationships, and ideals have significance *for me* in a way that they may not for others. His endorsement of the central idea is clear: "What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me..." [*Sources*, 34; see also 63]. The fact that something matters deeply to me though not to you is part of what makes me who I am, as having my particular identity in the Eriksonian sense Taylor generally means this.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Unfortunately, due to constraints of space, I shall not be able to discuss two further difficulties with Taylor's value theory: the conceptual exclusion of evil and the suggestion that there is an imperative to "retrieve" certain values.

<sup>27</sup>This is the idea that having an identity is a matter of being someone who knows where she stands in her commitments to projects, relationships, and ideals. See *Sources*, 28; "Reply to Braybrooke and de Sousa," *Dialogue* 33 (1994): 127; and "What is Human Agency?" 34-5. For Erikson's conception of identity, see *Identity*

One could, of course, construe the individuating role of personal commitments merely as a matter of *having certain preferences*: what gives people their individuality, on this view, is that they happen to find bowling more enjoyable than stamp-collecting, or national defense more important than rebuilding inner cities. This merely descriptive approach, however, overlooks the way in which one's sense of one's identity is built around the idea that one's projects are *worthwhile*. As Taylor argues, "Defining myself means finding what is significant in my difference from others. I may be the only person with exactly 3,732 hairs on his head...but so what?"<sup>28</sup> The same goes for one's personal commitments: they individuate a person as "having an identity" (in the relevant sense) only if they can be recognized as *worth* pursuing.

Clearly, however, reasonable individuals differ on what it is worthwhile *for each of them* to commit themselves to, and as I noted at the outset, respect for this pluralism is central to Taylor's most basic views. Despite this, the question remains whether his pluralism is not in tension with the ontological approach to value discussed in the last section, that is, to the idea that moving towards a more defensible conception of the good *for me* is necessarily a matter of moving closer to a "source."

This becomes particularly clear when we consider the situation in which others challenge our strong evaluations, calling upon us to explain just what makes our personal commitments worthwhile. For what is it to give a response to such a challenge? On Taylor's account, it is to identify the goods in terms of which one can say that one's pursuits are worthwhile. But this is not just an issue of applying a set of values. Rather, Taylor stresses that identifying the goods within a practice is bound up with articulating more fully what those goods consist in, and of doing so in such a way that one brings it about that one's interlocutor is *moved* in the appropriate way [*Sources*, 77]. Thus practical reasoning about what makes my commitments worthwhile coincides with practical reasoning about subject-transcending standards of worth themselves. And given that Taylor thinks it incoherent to conceive of the latter form of practical reasoning as a subjectivistic exploration

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and *the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980).  
28 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 35f.

of what has value simply *for me*, it is hard to see why the former should be fundamentally different in character. If this is right, however, it becomes equally hard to see why *differences* between individuals regarding the value they attach to certain projects, relationships, and ideals could be viewed as anything other than evidence that (at least) one of them is *mistaken*. The point is that, in trying to convince you that something is part of the good life for me, I must convince you that it is good. But since, on Taylor's account, doing so amounts to trying to make articulate the relevant good in a way that moves you as well, then getting you to see the point of my commitments is a matter of getting you to be moved by the good in question. This seems to leave little room for reasonable disagreement about what is worthwhile.

Not to put too fine a point on it, my worry here can be formulated as follows. It is unclear on what grounds Taylor can reject -- as his pluralism commits him to doing -- the claim that if *my* commitment, say, to the preservation of wilderness areas realizes an important good, then *no one else* can be justified in *failing* to share this commitment. The upshot of this would be that we would all be required to live basically the *same life*. Of course, there are contingent, practical grounds for divergences. We all start out in different positions and live under different circumstances, and thus no matter how worthwhile I deem literacy training among Swahili-speakers, it makes no sense to say that this should become a personal project of mine, owing to contingent reasons of geography and language-skills. But given that these sorts of considerations are based on contingent factors, they are matters of *weak* evaluation (as I argued earlier), and Taylor still remains open to the charge that reflections having to do with strong evaluations are such that they are necessarily geared toward the design of lives that realize the same values. Thus, the charge is that, as we engage in the ongoing process of re-interpreting ourselves and as we encounter the sorts of situations in which various goods play a role, we would all have to be approaching the same constellations of value-comments.

One way to formulate the problem would be to say that Taylor's ontological approach to value commits him to saying that claims about what is good or valuable must ultimately converge. And since, on Taylor's view, perceiving something as good cannot be detached

from being moved by that good [e.g., *Sources*, 73], everyone has to be moved by the same values. Though some might argue that this already represents grounds for indicting Taylor with anti-pluralism, this is not the point with which I want to take issue. Without denying the potential difficulties with such claims about convergence, Taylor could argue on hermeneutic grounds that we are only able to understand each other if we are conversing within the same horizon of value, and that this only requires that we are moved by the same values *to some minimal degree*.<sup>29</sup> This suggests the view that individuals differentiate themselves in virtue of the *degree* of importance various projects, relationships, and ideals have for them. Thus, I might recognize the protection of the rainforests to be well worth promoting, even though the reverence I feel for unspoilt nature pales in comparison with the significance that humanistic education has for me.

Indeed, Taylor's frequent use of spatial metaphors suggests just such a view and serves to clarify it as well. When he discusses what it means to try to determine who I am and want to be, he often speaks of "orientation," and at one point he introduces an interesting distinction: "Orientation has two aspects; there are two ways that we can fail to have it. I can be ignorant of the lie of the land around me....But then I can be lost in another way if I don't know how to place myself on this map" [*Sources*, 41]. The first aspect is that of exploring this terrain, of determining what has value. As we have seen, this involves the attempt to provide a "best account" of our affective-conative responses, thereby establishing the reality of certain goods. But it is the second component that is crucial for present purposes: "[O]ur orientation in relation to the good requires not only some framework(s) which defines the shape of the qualitatively higher but also a sense of where we stand in relation to this" [*Sources*, 42]. And this is where one's identity as an individual is forged: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand" [*Sources*, 27]. In this sense, orientation is a matter of *positionality*, of where I stand, as an individual, in one position rather than another.

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<sup>29</sup>Taylor does allow for the possibility that there may be cases in which the horizons of significance inhabited by two individuals or groups may be so far apart that value-judgments may be incommensurable. (*Sources* 61, 67, 81; see also "History, Comparison, Truth," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 146-164). Thus it is not always the case that there is a "we" involved.

This suggests a seemingly plausible way to construe interpersonal differences regarding what it is worthwhile to do with one's life. Two strong evaluators could have acquired a relatively clear understanding of the "lie of the land" -- that is, of the horizon of value without which one would be completely at a loss -- but might find themselves with personal value-commitments that locate them in rather different positions. Thus the model seems to allow Taylor to maintain his realism about value and yet recognize the individuating role of personal commitments.

There are, however, at least two difficulties with this approach. First, the proposed solution is achieved by suggesting that although the terrain *must* be shared (on hermeneutic grounds), positions on that terrain need not be shared. In other words, it suggests that there are goods that are generally binding, but that within the constraints of these, strong evaluators are at liberty to choose their own positions. In this sense, one might think of a "constitutive good" (which members of a community would be mistaken to deny) being employed in defense of a wide range of different "life goods." This is not, however, a position that is open to Taylor. For it is not clear that Taylor's onto-teleological approach can accommodate the deontological distinction between what is obligatory and what is permissible. Since Taylor seems to think that there is something incoherent in choosing arbitrarily, even between permissible options,<sup>30</sup> these are choices about which it must be possible to say what is better or worse. But if the process of justifying evaluations is bound up with the process of discerning the way in which goods lay a claim on me, then determining which is the better permissible option is, *like determining what is obligatory*, a matter of getting clear on what appropriately lays a claim on me. Thus Taylor is poorly placed to conceive the distinction between what is good *for me* and what is good *per se* in terms of the permissible and the obligatory.

Turning the second, related difficulty, it is not even clear that Taylor's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to value allows him the distinction between two modes of practical reasoning suggested by the spatial metaphor mentioned above: that of mapping

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<sup>30</sup>See his discussion of "radical choice" in "What is Human Agency?" 29-35. I have benefitted from Barbara Fultner's critical discussion of this concept in "Can Radical Choice be Eradicated from Human Agency?" ms. 1991.

the "lie of the land" we share, on the one hand, and that of finding one's own particular position within this horizon or "moral map," on the other. For how does one map out the available positions within this space of values, the options among which to choose? Only by making sense of one's affective-conative responses in terms of such goods [*Sources*, 10]. But what does it mean to determine whether or not one is "rightly placed in relation to the good" [*Sources*, 44]? The answer is the same: that in engaging in strong evaluation, one finds oneself (reliably) making sense of one's affective-conative responses in terms of such goods. Again, then, determining what goods are real is of a piece with deciding what place to give them in our lives, since goods are real only in virtue of their having a place in our lives to begin with. Trying to answer the question of whether it is more worthwhile *for me* to promote the protection of bio-diversity or the establishment of recreation areas thus turns out to be the same as trying to get clear on the good of unspoilt nature *in general*. But if this is so, then we have to look elsewhere for an account of what it means to reason about the good *for me* in particular. In the absence of any alternative account, then, we are back to the original difficulty.

To conclude this section, consider one further way of putting this objection to Taylor's position, namely, that we are left in the dark -- up to this point, at least -- about what it means not just to experience certain goods as real but to find my own way of ranking them in a way that is both *open to being reasoned about* and yet *plays a role in individuating me as the individual I am*.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, Taylor might argue that the ontology of goods has certain rankings built into it, in the sense that some values play a more central role within the moral order. On this view, questions of how to order the goods within a person's life -- whether to commit oneself to preserving wilderness areas or promoting humanistic education -- are to be answered by appeal to the hierarchically ordered ontology of what is good, in the sense that one has only really understood the value of preserving unspoilt wilderness if one also realizes that it is, say, greater than that of preserving historical landmarks but ultimately less than that of preserving human dignity. But this approach is not only out of keeping

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<sup>31</sup>I am indebted to William Rehg for discussions as to how to formulate this problem.



with Taylor's sense that conflicts between values are often *tragic*,<sup>32</sup> it also makes it difficult to see how Taylor's commitment to individuality could be maintained, since as part of the general moral order, the rankings of the goods would lay the same claim on everyone. What we still need, then, is an account of how there can be any arguing over which rankings are better or worse.

Thus far at least, Taylor has not provided an account of what it means to reason about the degree of significance that certain goods ought to take on in one's life (as this is reflected in one's personal commitments) and how this form of reasoning can nonetheless be individuating. In the next two sections, I consider two strategies for filling this lacuna that can be reconstructed from Taylor's writings.

### ***Reasoning Narratively about the Individual Good***

The first strategy to consider is based on the idea that there is a form of narrative reasoning that serves to clarify the particular good *for me* and does so in a way that captures the individuating role of personal commitments.<sup>33</sup> This too involves *situating* one's particular commitments, in this case, within the story of one's life. The idea is that what makes a project, relationship, or ideal appropriately part of the good life for me is that maintaining the commitment to it fits into a coherent narrative of who I am and want to be. Particularly in light of the irreducible singularity of person's life-history underlying this practice of justification, a narrative approach seems initially well-suited to capture the plurality and particularity of personal commitments.

Indeed, it suggests an answer to the question of how Taylor's ontological approach to objective value can account for the sense in which a commitment may have value for me in a way that it does not for others. The idea would be that although values are objective,

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32"The really important question may turn out to be how we combine in our lives two or three or four different goals, or virtues, or standards, which we feel we cannot repudiate but which seem to demand incompatible things of us" ("The Diversity of Goods," 236).

33In focussing on narration as a mode of reasoning about the direction one's life should take, I shall be passing over Taylor's other claims regarding narrativity, namely, that it satisfies a basic human need for making sense of one's life as a whole [Sources, 43, 50-51] and that personal self-improvement is best understood as the realization of a potential ("Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition," in Reading Rorty, ed. Alan R. Malachowski [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], 272).

the relationship of an individual to a value is differential, dependent in particular on how one is situated biographically. Thus, for example, although I might recognize the general, objective importance of protecting wilderness areas -- indeed, at one point, that ideal might even have held out the prospect of becoming the organizing project of my life -- owing to the contingent turns that my life has taken or perhaps to an urban upbringing, it happens not to have much importance *for me*. Similarly, explaining why other personal commitments are, in fact, central to my identity will involve telling a story that highlights other equally contingent elements in my particular life-history. In either case, since the explanation starts out from something irreducibly individual and particular, this seems to provide a way of thinking about the good life *for me* in a way that is sensitive to the particularities of my individual life.

For a strong evaluator, however, the fact that some goods play a more central role in one's life than others is not to be treated as an unquestionable *given*, nor is this fact to be given a merely causal *explanation*. Rather, my identity must answer to demands for examination, re-interpretation, and justification. In this sense, narration is a mode of reasoning about whether we are "placed rightly relative to the good," as Taylor himself stresses: "Thus making sense of my present action, when we are...dealing with...the issue of my place relative to the good, requires a narrative understanding of my life, a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story."<sup>34</sup> In part, this is a matter of narrative *coherence*, of justifying particular commitments or choices by "seeing how they fit into our surrounding life" [*Sources*, 48]. But since coherence alone is not enough for answering the question of what direction one's life *should* take or whether one has rightly understood the import of one's present commitments, we need to look further, to Taylor's view that narration involves "reasoning in transitions."<sup>35</sup>

The idea here is that narration represents a way of justifying the path one's life is taking by showing that the choice of certain personal commitments brings about a transition

<sup>34</sup>*Sources*, 47-52, here 48. See also "Self-Interpreting Animals," 67: "[Strong evaluation] involves, one might say, attributing to different motivations their place in the life of the subject."

<sup>35</sup>See *Sources*, 72, 105, 341; "Explanation and Practical Reason," esp. 42-53. Taylor is drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre's "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" *The Monist* 69 (1977): 453-472, esp. 467; and on Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, ch. 12.

that makes sense from the perspective established after one has passed through it. "We are convinced that a certain view is superior because we have lived a transition which we understand as error-reducing and hence as epistemic gain" [*Sources*, 72]. And here as well, reasoning about which particular commitments are part of the good life *for me* is *situated* within my contingent life-history.

Without wishing to deny the importance of this conception of narrative rationality, I would like to suggest that, here too, unclarities remain as to whether it can fill the gap in Taylor's account mentioned at the end of the previous section. Taylor may well be right that if we are to think of a shift from one set of commitments to another as *progress* or *growth*, we must conceive of this transition narratively. But if we are focussing on the question of what *justifies* the particular commitments themselves, then what is at issue is precisely what would constitute growth in a given case. What we want to know, in other words, is what the error is that is being reduced or what the "epistemic gain" refers to. And within the framework of Taylor's ontological approach to value, it seems that the account will again have to involve some reference to the transition being one that brings the individual "closer to the good." But if that is the case, if progress consists in leading one's life in a way that realizes certain goods more fully, then it is no longer clear how this mode of practical reasoning is going to be sufficiently attuned to the individuating role of personal commitments. For, again, whatever their individual, biographically contingent *starting-points* may be, strong evaluators can only justify their personal commitments by showing that they help to realize goods that place a similar demand on *every* strong evaluator.

### ***Articulation and the Particularity of Personal Resonance***

A second and distinctly Taylorian conception of what it means to reason about the individual good is to be found in what Taylor calls "articulation." What makes this concept particularly interesting for our purposes is that articulation seems to represent a mode of discovering objective value in one's own, personal way.

The central features of articulation should already be familiar from the earlier discussion of the interpretive component of strong evaluation, where we saw that the

search for the best account of what is good is bound up with the ongoing attempt to formulate appropriately the importance of one's commitments in a language of qualitative contrast. On Taylor's view, by finding a richer and more compelling articulation of the point of one's affective-conative responses -- one's admiration for someone's integrity or contempt for her lack of principles -- one comes to be better situated to see the true import of these responses and to evaluate reflectively these ways in which one finds oneself moved.

Like strong evaluation generally, articulation starts out from subjective experiences. But given its focus on interpreting the *expressive* aspects of one's affective-conative responses, articulation seems particularly well-suited to capture the personal dimension of those experiences. Particularly in his discussion of the "epiphanic art" of post-expressivist poets and artists [*Sources*, 419-493; cf. 374-90], Taylor formulates this in terms of the idea that by expressing what is going on in one's inner depths, one can disclose the good in a *manner* that is very much one's own.

The moral and spiritual order of things must come to us *indexed to a personal vision*....We are always articulating a personal vision. And the connection of articulation with inwardness remains for this reason unsevered and unbreakable. Just because we have to conceive of our task as the articulation of a *personal refraction*, we cannot abandon radical reflexivity and turn our back on our own experience or on the resonance of things in us.<sup>36</sup>

The suggestion seems to be that, as an expressive act, articulation can be thought of as revealing the particular evaluative color that the world has for one. In this sense, articulation involves discovering the good *as an individual* -- from one's own perspective and in one's own voice. In *celebrating* experiential "refraction," Taylor introduces the idea that one's individuality lies partly in the specific manner in which values "resonate" for some people and not others.

Clearly, Taylor cannot intend this to be understood solely as the expression of something utterly subjective, as the following passage makes clear:

On one level, [authenticity] clearly concerns the *manner* of espousing any end or form of life. Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be *my*

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<sup>36</sup>*Sources*, 428 (emphasis added); cf. 491, 510; and *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 89.

orientation. But this doesn't mean that on another level the *content* must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfil my desires or aspirations, *as against* something that stands beyond these....Self-referentiality of manner is unavoidable in our culture. To confuse the two is to create the illusion that self-referentiality of matter is equally inescapable. The confusion lends legitimacy to the worst forms of subjectivism.<sup>37</sup>

Unless we presuppose that articulation is geared toward discovering or exploring a real order of subject-transcending values, we have no way of accounting for the sense in which, as Taylor puts it, "There is a getting it right and getting it wrong in this domain."<sup>38</sup> On Taylor's view, then, however *personal* the resonance, articulating that resonance is geared toward gaining insight into and access to an ontological "order" [*Sources*, 510-13].

Because articulation is also a form of intersubjective practical reasoning, it suggests a way of filling the lacuna discussed earlier. In the face of disputes about personal commitments, articulation can provide interlocutors with "internal reasons" (in Bernard Williams's sense) for recognizing something as important or valuable: "I can only convince you by my description of the good if I speak for you, either by articulating what underlies your existing moral intuitions or perhaps by my description moving you to the point of making it your own."<sup>39</sup> In strong evaluation, as individuals challenge themselves and others regarding the true worth of their personal commitments within the context of their lives, articulation can serve to provide better and fuller responses as part of this never-ending process of re-evaluation.

For example, as I engage in strong evaluation, I may be inspired and empowered by evocations of the grandeur of unspoiled wilderness, but despite my best efforts, the poetry and photography that resonates so strongly with me may fail to move you in anything like the same way. At a phenomenological level, the resonances here are quite different, and this highlights distinctive features of who each of us is, at least in a descriptive sense. But what are we to make of this divergence? Assuming that we *both* acknowledge the general

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<sup>37</sup>*The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82.

<sup>38</sup>"Self-Interpreting Animals," 64f.

<sup>39</sup>*Sources*, 77. See also Taylor's parallel discussion of the "ad hominem" character of practical reasoning in "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments*, 34-60. Bernard Williams's account of "internal reasons" is found in "Internal and External Reasons," *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101-113.

importance of protecting wilderness areas, the question is whether sense can be made of my giving *lower priority* to wilderness preservation.

This interpersonal disagreement highlights what is also a question within the solitary reflections of strong evaluators: How can articulation, as a mode of strong evaluation, provide a means of getting clear about how much importance it is appropriate for me to give to certain projects, relationships, or ideals? And, again, the worry is that Taylor's ontological approach to value makes it difficult for him to avoid the conclusion that threatens to undermine his commitment to pluralism, namely, that the more fully you and I articulate our respective priorities and the point of our personal commitments, the more our respective conceptions of the good life would tend to converge.

On one reading, Taylor is arguing that the individuality of "manner" regarding personal resonance is basically a matter of *degree*. The idea here would be that everyone must be able to experience these goods to *some* extent -- thus preserving the objectivity and arguability of value-claims -- but that the degree to which these goods resonate will differ and will combine in various individuating ways. Thus, Taylor could say that the reality of goods is assured as long as you and I have an inkling of what the other finds so important, specifically, that we recognize as appropriate the articulations the other offers of particularly central experiences. On this view, the differences between us would lie in the fact that I experience a given good as resonating less strongly than you do. In other words, I find that the way in which you articulate that (stronger) resonance does not bring me significantly closer to an empowering moral source.

The difficulty with this approach is that it simply postpones the problem of how to conceptualize reasonable disagreement. For since Taylor rejects the idea that the "throbs, élans, or tremors I feel" are infallible guides to what is of "fundamental importance to me,"<sup>40</sup> then the process of strong evaluation demands that I be able to provide a further account of whether the *degree* of resonance I feel is *appropriate*. If it is possible to have values resonate to an inappropriate degree -- that is, if one allows for the possibility of error here -- then the only standard available in Taylor's account seems to be the appeal to a subject-

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<sup>40</sup>"What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" 224.

transcending standards of what is good -- *generally*, and not just *for me*. Once this is granted, however, then articulation no longer represents a way of justifying my personal choices and commitments that still accounts for their *individuating* character.

Unfortunately, then, Taylor's employment of the concept of "personal resonance" ultimately turns out to be ill-suited to capture the idea that judgments of what is important "for me" have both an intersubjectively normative dimension and an irreducibly individuating dimension.

### ***Conclusion: Diagnosis and Prescription***

We are left, then, with a tension in Taylor's value theory: his ontological account of non-subjective standards of value makes it difficult to envisage why the divergence of individuals' personal commitments should be viewed as a positive aspect of modern cultures in which, as Taylor consistently emphasizes, individuality and authenticity are to be prized. The worry remains that, without a more complete account of what it means to reason about the good *for me*, Taylor has no way of blocking the implication that, to the extent to which strong evaluators reflect critically and deliberate insightfully about how much importance certain projects, relationships, and ideals should have in their lives, there will be less and less room for reasonable divergence regarding what it is worthwhile to devote oneself to.

What is the *source* of this difficulty? It is not easy to separate out the interwoven strands in Taylor's complex overall account that are responsible for this tension, but three stand out.

First, Taylor's ontological approach tends to blur the distinction between *understanding what is good* and *having reasons for action*. There may well be grounds for saying that someone can explain her reasons for joining an environmental group in light of her articulated understanding of the reverence she feels for unspoilt wilderness. But any entailment in the other direction is much weaker: experiencing there to be a good bound up with unspoilt wilderness tells one very little about what one should do. This is not just because one will need to determine the best means for *applying* this sense of the good to one's particular circumstances, but because what one has reason to do will depend heavily on the relative

importance or priority of the good in question. But because of the tight connection Taylor draws between *endorsing* a good and being *moved* by it [*Sources*, 73], the difference between the two directions of entailment gets occluded, suggesting that two individuals will be able to share an understanding of a good just in case they find themselves motivated to act in the same way.

Second, I believe that a large part of the tension in Taylor's account can be traced to his aversion to any distinction between more universally binding moral evaluations and more particularistic and situated personal or "ethical" evaluations. By cutting himself off from various strategies for separating the obligatory and the permissible, Taylor has left himself with few ways of saying what seems most natural to say, namely, that although divergence in value-judgments regarding issues such as human suffering or basic rights is quite problematic, divergence regarding the goods that are realized in having particular sets of personal commitments is not only unproblematic, but the presupposition for a diverse society.

Finally, the particular *type* of value realism that Taylor endorses also contributes to the difficulties I have been discussing. As he conceives of the perception of value, in interpreting the point of our affective-conative responses, we are disclosing the *same good* in a wide range of situations. This contrasts sharply with those forms of moral realism that focus on discerning real properties of *situations*.<sup>41</sup> Because, on such approaches, the property of a given action -- say, its being "appropriate" -- is a function of a wide range of aspects of that particular situation -- *including the life-history and personal commitments of the agent* -- there is no need to claim that someone else acting differently in a situation that was otherwise the same would necessarily be making a mistake by failing to see the good instantiated in that situation. Taylor's approach has greater difficulty allowing the introduction of situational and agent-relative considerations into the specification of the content of value-judgments, and thus for conceptualizing the particularity of the good *for me*.

It seems clear, then, that Taylor's account is in need of some revision. If Taylor is to

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<sup>41</sup>For one possible way of doing this, see Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 164-174. See also the approaches of McDowell, Wiggins, and Johnston mentioned above, as well as Jonathan Dancy, "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties," *Mind* 92 (1983): 530-47.



maintain -- as I think he should -- his stated commitment to the individuating role of personal commitments, to non-subjective standards of evaluative reasons, and to the endlessly transformative character of self-interpretation, there are several options worth considering.

One option is suggested by what was just said about the form of realism Taylor endorses. If a realist approach based on properties of situations is better able to accommodate the individuating role of personal commitments, then Taylor might be able to retain his realism by modifying the form it takes. This might entail a radical transformation of his overall view, however, since it would shift the strong evaluator's focus attention toward the particulars of the situation and away from the good itself, understood as an empowering source with which one comes into "contact."

Alternatively, Taylor might develop a way of distinguishing between moral reasons and reasons of a more particular, personal or "ethical" sort. By doing so, Taylor could maintain his commitment to the idea that certain central values are almost universally experienced as making a claim on one, without this needing to be generalized to all contexts of evaluation. Indeed, it is hard to see how Taylor is going to be able to get around providing some way of distinguishing those value-judgments that are meant to be universally binding (at least "for us") from those that admit of variation and call for tolerant recognition (though not adoption). There are, granted, no easy ways of distinguishing the moral from the personal, and Taylor himself has highlighted some of the difficulties in trying to do so.<sup>42</sup> But, for strong evaluators, the question must be faced: In what contexts are disagreements in value-judgments actually problematic? This way of posing the question

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<sup>42</sup>See *Sources*, 64; "What is Human Agency?" 24; "Self-Interpreting Animals," 68; "The Diversity of Goods," 236-8; "The Motivation behind a Procedural Ethic," in *Kant and Political Philosophy: The Contemporary Legacy*, ed. R. Beiner and W. J. Booth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 337-360; and "Language and Society," in *Communicative Action: Essays on Jürgen Habermas's "The Theory of Communicative Action"*, ed. A. Honneth and H. Joas and trans. J. Gaines and D. L. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 32-5.

Nonetheless, for proposals as to how to make such a distinction, see Habermas, "On the Pragmatic, Ethical, and Moral Employments of Practical Reason," in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. C. Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 1-18; Rainer Forst, *Kontexte der Gerechtigkeit: Politische Philosophie jenseits von Liberalismus und Kommunitarismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), esp. ch. 5; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, ch. 9-10; Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 9-10; and Lutz Wingert, *Gemeinsinn und Moral* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), 131-56.

opens up space for a more context-sensitive approach. In particular, it suggests that in addressing the issue of which divergent value-judgments are cause for concern, we will have to pay attention to the character of the particular *audience* to whom a particular judgment is addressed.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the reservations voiced in this essay regarding Taylor's ontological approach to value, I do not wish to deny the overall importance of the approach, either for the challenge it poses to naturalistic conceptions of evaluation or the spotlight it throws on modernity's tendency to cut itself off from vital sources of motivation. My restricted aim here has been to draw attention to the need, within Taylor's approach, for a fuller account of how to distinguish between reasoning about what is good *in general* (at least within a particular culture or tradition) and reasoning about what is good *for me*, and of doing so in a way that acknowledges *both* the in-principle criticizability of individual conceptions of the good life *and* the plurality of ways of life that are not unreasonable. Until Taylor resolves this issue, his own unflagging commitments to pluralism will continue to be in tension with his ontological approach to value theory.

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<sup>43</sup>See my "Toward a Concept of Ethical Autonomy," 117-8. The talk of audience-specificity connects up with a potentially interesting approach that is only touched on in Taylor's work, where he speaks of finding one's identity as a matter of "gradually finding one's voice as an interlocutor" ("The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, ed. D.R. Hiley, J.F. Bohmann, and R. Shusterman [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991], 313). This is echoed in his talk of locating oneself in "webs of interlocation" (*Sources*, 36). These are intriguing suggestions, apparently inspired by Bakhtin, but they are as yet quite sketchy. Taylor has yet to explain in detail how this is supposed to work and how, in particular, it can be squared with his ontological account of value.