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Overcoming Transcendence: Charles Taylor and Nihilism

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Introduction

This project is one of *fundamental ethics*, in the same way that Heidegger described his project in *Being and Time* as one of "fundamental ontology" (Int., I, §3; Int., II, §7). Fundamental ethics refers here to the attempt to describe the essence of ethical life without recourse to abstract theoretical formulations and rules or to mere psychological behavior or to ethereal metaphysical entities, all ethical approaches that will be considered in subsequent chapters. Fundamental ethics seeks a genuine and compelling answer to the question of how one should live and sees providing such an answer as philosophy's primary goal.

This formulation is useful in describing the connection between Part I, "Non-Naturalism, Naturalism and the Place of Philosophy," and Part II, "Away from the Transcendent." Heidegger looked at the history of metaphysics and criticized it for ignoring Being, and therefore sought with his fundamental ontology to describe the very essence of our Being-in-the-world. I looked at the history of modern moral theory and found myself dissatisfied with its lack of connection to what I thought I knew about ethical life, so I looked for truer alternatives, or at least alternatives that struck me as truer; this became Part I of the project. Working with those

alternatives, I tried in Part II to apply a fundamental ethics to some problem in our culture, using the approaches described in Part I as a springboard for my own attempt to develop a joyful mode of being.

Part I therefore grew out of my own frustration with the abstractness and formality of modern moral theory, of the Kantian and utilitarian varieties alike, and I sought alternatives wherein our moral lives were described in terms not of rules and procedures, but in ways that could get to the heart of the difficult and deeply meaningful decisions that make up the conflicts and dilemmas of human life. Part I deals, then, with the non-naturalist and naturalist conceptions of ethics, represented by Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams respectively, as ethical paradigms that can grasp this essence in a way that Kantians and utilitarians haven't, or so Taylor and Williams claim. The aspects of ethical life that I examine there include Taylor's transcendental human agency, according to which we are "strong evaluators" who feel the call or pull of certain goods and ideals, for whom moral life exist along the three axes of what it is good to do, to be, and to love. Non-naturalism of Taylor's sort is also committed to retrieving a good *beyond* life, of affirming our connection to transcendence and not limiting our moral ontology to this-worldly immanence. Taylor's diagnosis of modernity, grounded in this emphasis on the need for transcendence, therefore proceeds to condemn modern secularism for its "exclusive humanism" and failure to pay heed to transcendence. Taylor's philosophical anthropology does the work of making this diagnosis based upon its account of human agency.

Naturalism, on the other hand, as articulated by Williams, wants to take a wholly *realistic* view of human nature and describes ethics in non-ethical terms – that is, in terms strictly of what is true of our history and psychology without any reference to non-natural entities. Williams thus evinces a strong skepticism about philosophy and its efficacy, and has little to say about modernity, as evidenced by his thin discussion of political problems.

I conclude in Part I that naturalism, in trying to describe the ethical in non-ethical terms, cannot therefore be a fundamental ethics because naturalism actually downgrades the role of ethics as conceived as a *philosophical* activity. I found non-naturalism, which takes philosophy to have a robust explanatory role, to be more capable of asking fundamental questions of interest to our culture, a task Taylor frequently sets out to do in his work.

Part II answers what it would mean for a non-naturalist to ask such fundamental questions, and there I find the non-naturalist strategy of responding to such questions to be deeply wanting. The problem I consider there is how to combat the threat of *nihilism*, which non-naturalists maintain amounts to our loss of connection to transcendent frames of value, a formulation seen in Taylor's diagnosis of modernity and its exclusive humanism. Combating nihilism, therefore, is purportedly accomplished by reconnecting with the transcendent and sacred things.

Drawing on Nietzsche's writings on nihilism, I argue that nihilism is in fact the yearning *for* transcendence, and that the way to avoid nihilism is to throw off the transcendent completely. That means Taylor's Christian monotheistic non-

naturalism, which is explicitly transcendental in its concerns, is totally inadequate to the task of combating nihilism, and I also argue that secular humanism, which I take to be a weak middle ground strategy of the equivalent replacement of religion with a basically religious outlook minus God, is also not up to the task because of its latent similarities to the religious form of life. At the end of Part II, I develop my own vision, heavily influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche, of what a truly non-transcendent, joyful mode of being would be, involving our robust engagement with and concern for our own being-in-the-world, a way of loving the world by being committed to living in it without appeal to the transcendent.

I've striven for a fundamental ethics in the following ways. In contrast to the decision procedure models of modern moral theory, I've engaged with non-naturalistic transcendental human agency and naturalistic psychological realism to develop a more fundamental account of moral life. In connecting moral ontology to diagnoses of modernity in the vein of Charles Taylor, I opted to use non-naturalism rather than naturalism as a springboard for discussing issues of great cultural importance because I found non-naturalism's role for philosophy to be more robust and interesting. Fundamental ethics must answer fundamental questions, so I turned to the problem of nihilism in contemporary culture, which the non-naturalists take to be a problem about our lack of connection to transcendence. Breaking with non-naturalism, I disputed that definition and concluded, using Nietzschean arguments, that a joyful mode of being-in-the-world is the only way (or at least the only way I know how) to live a meaningful life without transcendence.

That conclusion I take to be an example of how ethics should work: by getting to the heart of a deeply complex problem of moral and cultural life and seek to answer it without recourse to pat and easy rules and procedures. My own conception of fundamental ethics includes another prescription, which I have used to animate all my work, especially in Part II, but which might not be shared by everybody: that the answers to profound moral questions of this kind have to be found *in the world* into which we are thrown and in which we exist and where we must create a life for ourselves. Fundamental ethics should teach us to say yes to life by embracing the world in which we find ourselves and to strive to make our lives better in the context of that world. Non-naturalists disagree profoundly with such a this-worldly way of seeing things, and naturalists, to my mind, are not strongly enough attuned to the issue in the first place. But I have tried to defend my own view of what it means to live well and why the question of doing so is so important.

Part I: Non-Naturalism, Naturalism and the Place of Philosophy

"There is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can." –
Martin Buber

A. Taylor's Non-Naturalism: Ad Hominem Reasoning and Transcendental Human Agency

In this chapter I'll identify two major aspects of Taylor's non-naturalist program: his privileging of ad hominem argument over apodictic reasoning, and his account of transcendental human agency. The explication of both these positions, which he takes to be more accurate accounts of human rationality and agency respectively that are truer to our real ethical experience than mainstream modern philosophical conceptions and which involve appeals to *non-natural goods* typically ignored or downgraded by Kantian and utilitarian moral theory, will make clear Taylor's stark opposition to naturalism, which has profoundly influenced those views he is attacking, and will be important in later evaluations of Taylor and his transcendental commitments.

Throughout his work, from papers such as "What is human agency?" and "Self-interpreting animals" to the major book *Sources of the Self*, Taylor identifies naturalism as his archenemy. Unlike philosophers who proudly try to situate philosophy alongside science such as Hume, who in seeking a comprehensive "science of man" is now seen as a major contributor to naturalism, or Quine, who tried to "naturalize" epistemology, Taylor uses naturalism as a dirty word for a number of currents in intellectual culture that he sees as profoundly unhealthy for our self-understanding. In the paper "Explanation and practical reason," Taylor tries

to show how naturalism is totally insufficient to resolve moral disputes. In the preface to *Sources of the Self*, Taylor calls his project "an exercise in retrieval" (xi) and in "Explanation and practical reason" he again seeks to retrieve modes of thinking that he argues naturalism has discarded, leaving us impoverished and defenseless against a bleak skepticism. Taylor's project in "Explanation and practical reason" is to show how naturalism led us astray and to try to point to some positive concepts that will strengthen our ability to resolve moral disputes.

What does Taylor mean by the term naturalism? Broadly speaking, philosophical naturalism refers to the effort to somehow ground philosophy in or align it with the scientific study of natural phenomena. For Taylor, naturalism, the dominant mode of thinking in the West since the Scientific Revolution, is a quest for objectivity, for a neutral account of the universe that has "no place for intrinsic worth or goals that make a claim on us" (38). In speaking only in the language of natural science, of only observable particles, naturalism is for Taylor inherently reductionist; it provides a poor and thin moral ontology because value can thus only be projected by us humans, not inherent in the world as it is. Naturalism cannot and indeed refuses to speak about goods and the other ideals that guide our thinking. Instead, for the naturalist, the universe consists of particles and facts: "In a neutral universe, what agreement there is between attitudes seems merely a brute fact, irrelevant to morals, and disagreement seems utterly inarbitrable by reason, bridgeable only by propaganda, arm twisting, or emotional manipulation" (39-40).

Thus naturalism, which speaks of a neutral universe without the thick ontological concepts that Taylor seeks to revive, leads inevitably to moral skepticism. If the universe consists only of facts not of values[1] then we can only adopt ethnocentric justifications of our beliefs and ideals. Richard Rorty embraces a position much like this in, among other places, his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in which he urges us to be "ironists," sophisticated intellectuals who are fully aware of the contingency of our value systems, of the historical accident that we happen to have been born into a certain culture that believes certain things. We should be proudly ethnocentric, Rorty argues, relying on just solidarity among our community to justify our commitments to what we know to be mere contingencies (Cf. 189-198). Just as Taylor would have predicted, the Rortian ironist takes as the upshot of modern intellectual culture the fact that there is total incommensurability among competing moral outlooks, and that mere rhetoric and ethnocentric saber-rattling are the only way to even attempt to bridge that incommensurability.

Taylor in "Explanation and practical reason" argues that there are other methods of resolving moral disputes and that they require moving beyond naturalism for us to retrieve the tools necessary to resolve those disputes. To make clear what naturalism leaves out, Taylor draws a distinction between two styles of practical reason. The *apodictic model* of practical reason starts from neutral premises, without prior commitments, and builds foundations from there that can be neutrally agreed upon, as in the Cartesian model, and is thus the preferred model

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[1] At best, values can be thought of for the naturalist (according to Taylor) as ultimately expressions of subjective desires or will, or as projections that are arbitrary because they are not responsive to something objective out there. So naturalism is not moral realism/objectivism.

of the epistemological tradition, in which "Our knowledge claims are to be checked, to be assessed as fully and responsibly as they can be, by breaking them down and identifying their ultimate foundations…Modern reason tends to be understood no longer substantively but procedurally" (40).

So according to Taylor, our culture privileges the apodictic form of practical reason over the *ad hominem model*, and the rational apodictic model is not capable of recognizing the distinction between strong evaluation and weak evaluation. Strong evaluation refers to "the special nature of moral goods" and accords them "a stronger status, that we see [them] as demanding, requiring, or calling for [a strong] commitment…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" (37). The ad hominem style appreciates strong evaluation and makes appeals to the shared commitments and values of the interlocutors of a moral dispute. Instead of starting at neutral apodictic ground, ad hominem reason begins with shared and held values:

> The attempt…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. Or put negatively, that the
> attempt to separate out a language of neutral description, which
> combined with commitments or pro/con attitudes might recapture
> and make sense of our actual explanations, analyses, or deliberations
> leads to failure and will always lead to failure. (39)

Those who favor the apodictic model cannot accept this strategy, which relies not only on ontological claims about values that are beyond the purview of their cosmology, but also because, while the apodictic purports to appeal only to what is objectively true, the ad hominem style *begins with appeals to what is already believed and what are held up as commitments*. Thus the apodictic sees itself as modern, naturalized, objective and superior to the ad hominem, which the apodictic/epistemological tradition labels as parochial, conservative, and unable to see what is really true beyond mere beliefs.

What Taylor wants to say is that in fact the apodictic model is the inferior one, and that without the ad hominem model and the strong evaluations upon which it relies (and which we do perform all the time, *pace* the apodictic partisans who either ignore qualitative distinctions or who downgrade them as subjectivist), moral disputes become irresolvable. Taylor uses the notion of *transitions* from one position to another as an example of the success of ad hominem reasoning, saying that "we can give a convincing narrative account of the passage from the first to the second as an advance in knowledge, a step from a less good to a better understanding of the phenomena in question" (42), *without* appealing to criteria.

The point of the discussion about transitions and the three arguments against foundationalist epistemology is the need to "appeal to what the opponent is already committed to, or at the least cannot lucidly repudiate…debate can be rationally conducted even when there is no such explicit common ground at the outset" (53-54); we are "bringing to light something the interlocutor cannot

repudiate" (54). Striking a Wittgensteinian tone, Taylor says that, "we have to see [arguments about transitions] as making appeal to our implicit understanding of our form of life" (49). So the pre-Galilean scientist sees the Galilean Revolution as a kind of progress because "in virtue of what pre-Galileans already accept they cannot recognize the significance of Galilean science's massive leap forward" (49). In other words, total incommensurability is impossible because "the real positions held in history don't correspond to these watertight deductive systems, and that is why rational transitions are in fact possible" (49).

Arguments about transitions can be helped by some "insight which is marginally present in all cultures" (55). Taylor sees these kinds of disputes as being resolvable only by appeals to shared values and beliefs, not by appealing to objective/neutral criteria, which just leaves us in a morass of incommensurability and skeptical despair. We can come to a mutual understanding in disputes about cultural transitions only when we are "articulating the implicit, and by the direct characterization of transitional moves that make no appeal to criteria at all" (60).

A crucial element of ad hominem reasoning is what Taylor calls its "error-reducing" quality: "we propose to our interlocutors transitions mediated by such error-reducing moves, by the identification of contradictions, the dissipation of confusion, or by rescuing from (usually motivated) neglect a consideration whose significance they cannot contest...The transition is justified by the very nature of the move that effects it. Here the ad hominem mode of argument is at its most intense, and most fruitful" (53). Seeing transitions as gains over their predecessors has

almost a therapeutic effect: seeing in the transition elements of their shared, embedded form of life, or seeing in the transition the ability to "make better sense of the world" (43), the disputants come to agree on the virtue of the transition at hand and see in the transition glimmers of the form of life that they share.

As Taylor stresses later, this method of resolving disputes is strongly and inherently *comparative*. Once seen in that light, it is increasingly obvious how different this mode is from the apodictic, criteria-based strategy where arguments rely only on bare facts and standards, not on the richer account of forms of life and shared values. We strive to gain common ground, which he calls "getting over the hump" (57). The interpretive question becomes *how* Taylor means for us to find "an insight which is marginally present in all cultures" or "the background of a certain cosmology, or of semiarticulate beliefs about the way things have to be" (55-56) that are so crucial to getting over the hump between disputants (he cites "this sense of the special importance of the human being" and "that humans are especially important and demand special treatment" as two such instances of shared cultural insights). This sort of project of philosophical anthropology is what Taylor undertakes in *Sources of the Self*, as we shall see, where he seeks to "retrieve" outmoded ways of being from the grip of naturalism and other humanistic forms of exclusive immanence.

Taylor sees his own philosophical project as diametrically opposed to such a view of human agency as disengaged, rationalistic, making decisions on the basis of rigid procedures, unconcerned with things like objective values or intrinsic worth,

all of which are downgraded to the realm of subjectivism, unworthy of the attention

of any self-respecting modern, or grounded instead only by rules like the categorical

imperative. In the paper "What is human agency?" Taylor lays out his view of

transcendental human agency, arguing that the disengaged subject, in its various

forms, is simply a defective representation of how we behave. He proposes a

different description that he claims better accords with the kinds of persons we are,

just as ad hominem reasoning is more true to the way we actually make arguments.

The crucial element of human agency for Taylor is our use of *strong evaluation*, our

constant engagement with value and worth. Only through our continual attention to

value are we fully realized as persons or human agents. Taylor thus affirms the

ubiquity of value in human life.

Agency somehow of course fundamentally involves *acting* and *deciding*. In

order to make a decision, one typically chooses among options. Taylor calls this act

of choosing *evaluation* and he distinguishes between two kinds of evaluation. The

first kind is *weak evaluation*, in which "we are concerned with outcomes" (16). The

mere concern for outcomes involves either quantitative calculation – will there be a

net benefit or a net loss as a result of my decision? – or thin and ultimately

superficial notions of qualitative comparison such as what is "more fun" or a "better

value" (18). To make the contrast negatively, weak evaluation never involves the

worth of those desires and it never involves "the quality of our motivation" (16).

Strong evaluation, on the other hand, uses a richer language to describe how

we decide. All those things that weak evaluation ignores, strong evaluation pays

attention to. The strong evaluator speaks in terms of "evaluative terms" such as whether something is "good" on the one hand, or "bad, base, ignoble, trivial, superficial, unworthy, and so on" on the other (18). Through the use of such terms, "desires are distinguished as to worth" (18), *not* arbitrated by mere calculation: "Some desired consummation may be eschewed not because it is incompatible with another, or if because of incompatibility this will not be contingent. Thus I refrain from some cowardly act, although very tempted to do so, but this is not because this act at this moment would make any other desired act impossible…but rather because it is base" (19).

The contrast between the goodness that is embraced and the cowardliness/baseness that is eschewed is central to Taylor's definition of strong evaluation, which for him is, like the ad hominem style of argument, essentially *contrastive* (involving what he calls evaluative contrasts or qualitative distinctions): "Each concept…can only be understood in relation to the other" which is its opposite (19). The conflict between choices, between what is chosen and what is rejected, is a *deep* one rooted in the values that the decider holds up for himself, not a mere contingency (21). E.g., instead of choosing X because it *happens* to be better for the community than Y, or choosing A because it would be more enjoyable/aesthetically interesting than B, we choose based upon the values we wholeheartedly hold. Such is Taylor's general picture of the strong evaluator.

Taylor argues that this distinction is constitutive of "the different kinds of self that each [model of evaluation] involves. In examining this it will, I think, become

overwhelmingly plausible that we are not beings whose only authentic evaluations are non-qualitative as the utilitarian tradition suggests" (23). Strong evaluation is (crucially) "true to reality. This is a question about what our motivation really is, how we should truly characterize the meaning things have for us" (22). Anything that denies strong evaluation is nothing less than "distorting the reality concerned" (22). What kind of self does strong evaluation imply?

The first element of the strongly evaluating self is *articulacy*. Instead of just "weighing alternatives," of merely choosing on the basis of superficial criteria like a computer picking the most efficient algorithm, the strong evaluator is able to explain, in a complex and rich way, the reasons for his choice in terms of the values he holds and the ideals that guide him, to genuinely explain the "superiority of one alternative" (24) over another: "Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy about preferences, but also about the quality of life, the kind of beings we are or want to be. It is in this sense deeper" (26). This sense of *depth* implies "the possibility of a plurality of visions which there was not before," a wide range of forms of life, "courses of action – which can only be characterized through the qualities of life they represent, and characterized contrastively" (27). Articulacy about depth leads the strong evaluator to view the alternatives he has eschewed as fundamentally incommensurable with the ones he has chosen. This process of accepting one alternative as superior to others is referred to as a "struggle of self-interpretations" (27), an arduous process of choosing the person one wants to be, in some sense.

The second important aspect of the strongly evaluating self is *responsibility* for the articulations that are chosen: "We think of the agent not only as partly responsible for what he does, for the degree to which he acts in line with his evaluations, but also as responsible in some sense for these evaluations" (28). This state of affairs implies responsibility because these articulations/evaluations *make action possible*: "That description and experience are bound together in this constitutive relation admits of causal influences in both directions: it can sometimes allow us to alter experience by coming to fresh insight; but more fundamentally it circumscribes insight through the deeply embedded shape of experience for us" (37).

By thinking of value in a certain way, "modes of experience" become real options for us, and therefore the evaluations that make those experiences possible carry moral weight. Articulations, therefore, are tied up with *the kind of person* we have become, and we are morally responsible for the scope of that vision. Our imperfections as evaluators imply that "evaluation is such that there is always room for re-evaluation…Responsibility falls to us in the sense that it is always possible that fresh insight might alter my evaluations and hence even myself for the better" (39). The modern self must always be ready to reevaluate her most fundamental values, to interrogate what is important and meaningful, and to constantly refashion her language to widen or improve the scope of her moral vision. Such an exercise is intensely difficult because it reaches for ways of seeing and speaking which are not "readily to hand, generally those which are going the rounds of our milieu or society, and live within them without too much probing. The obstacles in the way of going

deeper are legion" (42). In other words, responsibility makes us engage in existential, fundamental reflections "about the self, its most fundamental issues, and a reflection which engages the self most wholly and deeply" (42).

Even though strong evaluation is fundamental to human life, according to Taylor, he mentions two philosophical viewpoints that are opposed to it. The first is utilitarianism, which he calls the most important articulation of the weak evaluation model described above. Take a person who is struggling with obesity. The strong evaluator sees the issue as one of dignity, pride, and the kind of person one wants to be (i.e., one who can control his eating habits and therefore master temptation and so on). The utilitarian sees the issue quite differently: "if I can get over this 'hang-up' and see the real nature of the underlying anxiety, I will see that it is largely groundless, that I do not really incur the risk of punishment or loss of love; in fact there is quite another list of things at stake here: ill health, inability to enjoy the outdoor life, early death by heart-attack, and so on" (22). One can think of an obsessive calorie cutter struggling with overeating versus somebody motivated by the deepest values and concerns, who is struggling not with mere calculation of digestive intake but with radical self-interpretation. Taylor would predict that the latter person is better equipped to deal with the problem than the former, who is engaging in a more superficial, less *honest* exercise.

Interestingly, the second alternative to strong evaluation that Taylor cites is existentialist radical choice, which posits that strong evaluation itself is something we can choose to do or not, which for Taylor is unacceptable (29). Radical choice

cannot describe real moral dilemmas because for the radical choice theorist, we just decide one option is viable and the other is not, which is not a true dilemma in the disturbing and powerful sense that it is for the strong evaluator, who is struggling to choose based on *the kind of person she wants to be.* The radical choice theorist "has no language in which the superiority of one alternative over the other can be articulated" (30). The radical choice agent "has to choose, if he chooses at all, like a simple weigher" (31). The prima facie plausibility of radical choice – that there is a great plurality of moral visions among which we must choose, that such a decision is supremely difficult, and that we want our decisions to be based in value – really leads instead to the much richer strong evaluation model (what we might call the *inevitability argument* for strong evaluation): "When we see what makes the theory of radical choice plausible, we see how strong evaluation is something inescapable in our conception of the agent and his experience; and this because it is bound up with our notion of the self. So that it creeps back in even where it is supposed to have been excluded" (33).

One does not typically think of the British Benthamite utilitarian and the French Sartrean existentialist as adhering to the same vision of moral life, but for Taylor they represent two poles of the same phenomenon in the history of philosophy. Like the utilitarian, "The subject of radical choice is another avatar of that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom. But this promised total self-possession would in fact be the most total self-loss"(35).

That contrast well illustrates the thrust of Taylor's picture here. The objectifying/projecting disembodied ego, a view shared by the utilitarian and the existentialist as well as by partisans of apodictic reasoning, is a distortion because for Taylor transcendental human agency consists of *value all the way down*. We are value-laden creatures for whom the universe is not devoid of meaning but is always full of it (one can see Heidegger's influence on Taylor's thinking here), and it is our task as human agents to evaluate those meanings, to make distinctions between the ones we like and the ones we don't, the ones we are committed to and those we reject, and to act responsibly in making those distinctions and acting on them. We are not inarticulate machines who just quantify, who make easy and superficial choices; we are richly articulate, interpretive language users. Only by thinking of ourselves according to that latter model can we confer on ourselves the responsibility that we think we are due as genuine human agents. We can only truly hold ourselves accountable to our actions when we think of those actions as grounded in the qualitative distinctions, the strong evaluations, in which we are constantly engaged and in which we attune ourselves to goods.

So in light of these two positions, the argument for ad hominem reasoning and his account of transcendental human agency, what is it that we mean when we say that Taylor is a non-naturalist? Both ad hominem reasoning and transcendental human agency stand in opposition to the view of the human subject as a disengaged self who uses either apodictic rationality or weak evaluation to make his decisions. In contrast to that, Taylor argues for a view of human agency as involving the strong and ubiquitous engagement with *value* – either in articulating reasons (by making

use of already existing commitments) or in making strong evaluations and qualitative distinctions (on the basis of deeply felt ideals to which we attune ourselves). These values or goods cannot be described in naturalistic terms in that they are neither discrete categories such as utility, nor definable rules like the categorical imperative. Taylor's goods eschew natural description, yet they are fundamentally true to human nature, he argues. Thus they are non-natural goods. As we go further along and discuss the more specifically *transcendental* aspects of Taylor's transcendental human agency, specifically the involvement there or our *attunement* to the good and the importance of a good beyond life, we will see in even more dramatic fashion the deep extent to which Taylor is a non-naturalist.

B. Retrieving a Good Beyond Life

In chapter I A, we saw that Taylor's non-naturalism makes enormous room for non-natural goods. Here we'll examine his project of retrieving a good beyond life. In performing a genealogy of the modern West's notions of agency, selfhood, and the good, Taylor identifies what he calls the practical primacy of ordinary life as a crucial element of our culture. This argument is first fleshed out prominently in *Sources of the Self*, where this practical primacy is endorsed by Taylor (the extension of rights, for example, is a good thing), while the *metaphysical* affirmation of ordinary life, the denial of the importance of a good beyond *this* life, is taken to be detrimental to our self-understanding as spiritual agents who are attuned to the good. In later essays, including "A Catholic modernity?" and "Disenchantment-reenchantment," Taylor tries to spell out in more detail what is worth saving from

the period before the practical primacy of ordinary life took hold when the metaphysical primacy was also held as true. In these later essays, Taylor argues that the practical primacy is extremely important and worth saving and that it requires certain ideals to prop up its goals of extending human rights and respect for all persons that only the metaphysical affirmation can provide. Modern secularism is insufficient to support its own ideals. Across the spectrum of his work on this issue, Taylor identifies his project as one of *retrieval*, of rescuing discarded ways of thinking. The retrieval of *metaphysical ideals of the good* from their secularist downgrading will allow our culture to carry out our benevolent goals better than our currently impoverished self-understanding could ever hope to do alone.

Before we can evaluate how convincing Taylor's argument on this issue is, we need to define the practical affirmation of ordinary life. Taylor's story goes something like the following. For the Greeks, the life of contemplation, whether of the forms (Plato) or of the good life (Aristotle), was the highest human ideal. A good beyond life was the highest human goal. Catholicism inherited and absorbed this tradition, and the highest (monastic/sacerdotal) form of life was spent in spiritual meditation on the meaning of Christ. Practically speaking, this meant that the value of most humans' lives (the lower classes) was not valued as much as all human life is valued today (by universal human rights). But with the Protestant Reformation, "we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life was on the contrary the very centre of the good life. The crucial issue was how it was led, whether worshipfully and in the fear of God or not. But the life of the God-fearing was lived out in marriage and their calling. The previous 'higher' forms of life were dethroned,

as it were" (*Sources*, 13). He cites bourgeois liberal politics (with its concern for "issues of welfare") as well as the revolutionary elevation of "man the producer" as examples of this newer ethos (14). Thus, while the 'higher' life is downgraded and ordinary life is affirmed, the ordinary lives of most humans becomes valued and encoded in the universalism that we see as our great achievement today.

Moral philosophy, and the cultural context that it has come to represent, is guilty according to Taylor of taking this *practical* affirmation of ordinary life to imply the unimportance or even nonexistence of the *metaphysical* ideals that govern all the qualitative distinctions (noble/base, high/low) that in fact already pervade our moral lives. The partisans of ordinary life accuse qualitative distinctions "of wrongly and perversely downgrading ordinary life, of failing to see that our destiny lies here in production and reproduction and not in some alleged higher sphere, of being blind to the dignity and worth of ordinary human desire and fulfillment" (23). The practical affirmation, which is undoubtedly an advancement for our culture, has implied a metaphysical position that Taylor sees as profoundly damaging.

So strong evaluations are not fully understood when the affirmation of ordinary life is taken to its metaphysical extreme. For all its talk of extricating qualitative distinction from of our lives, the affirmation of ordinary life "itself amounts to [a qualitative distinction]; else it has no meaning at all" (23) for in order to affirm ordinary life, the life of contemplation and the meditation on ideals must be downgraded and ultimately distinguished from the higher form of life. Thus the arguments against strong evaluations are "deeply confused."

What have we lost by affirming only the metaphysical primacy of ordinary life? For Taylor it boils down to "'contact' with the good, or 'how we are placed' in relation to the good" (44). Contact with the good can mean holding up God, fame/infamy, order, artistic expression, and, yes, the affirmation or "furthering" of ordinary human life as ideals that govern our actions; Taylor holds "all these diverse aspirations as forms of a craving…[that] is ineradicable from human life" (44). This contact with the good is the most fundamentally transcendental aspect of Taylor's account of human agency, to which we will return many times.

Without acknowledging these ideals to which we attune ourselves as the guide for our qualitative distinctions, our strong evaluations cannot properly hold water for us because they will be shorn of context and we will fail to understand why they should matter so much to us. Without an acute self-consciousness about our moral sources, the conclusions we want to draw will be harder to arrive at. The "language of assessment" necessary to strong evaluation makes no sense to us without an awareness of the sources from which they spring, and without attuning ourselves to those ideals, "I cannot do without them in assessing possible courses of action, or in judging the people or situations around me, or in determining how I really feel about some person's acting or way of being" (57).

Now that we see why Taylor sees the pervasive metaphysical affirmation of ordinary life to be in conflict with our moral behavior of qualitative distinctions and strong evaluations, the question becomes *what we need to retrieve* in order to better situate our moral language and our qualitative distinctions in the network of the

goods that guide our lives. What we need, he argues, at the end of *Sources*, is "a work, we might say, of liberation…we have read so many goods out of our official story, we have buried their power so deep beneath layers of philosophical rationale, that they are in danger of stifling. Or rather, since they are our goods, human goods, *we* are stifling" (520). (See chapter II B for a critique of the role of Christian monotheism in this project of "liberation.")

In the later essay "A Catholic modernity?" Taylor begins to answer the question of what needs to be retrieved. He takes as his enemy in that essay the notion "that human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether" (172). Life itself is all that matters according to this viewpoint, which Taylor terms *exclusive humanism*. In contrast, Taylor wants to "[acknowledge] the transcendent [which] means aiming beyond life or opening yourself to a change in identity" by attuning ourselves to metaphysical ideals of the good or God (174). Even though we no longer acknowledge the transcendent ("Western modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent," 177), the ideals of *Christianity* – of seeing all persons as having dignity, as all being equal (before in the eyes of God, in whose image we are made, and now in virtue of shared human characteristics such as reason) – are being realized to a far greater extent than they were when Christianity was the only game in town. Paradoxically, then, the end of Christian dominance in the West meant the victory of Christian thinking for Western culture thanks to liberal ideals like tolerance. This state of affairs has been achieved in part by the rise of the *practical* affirmation of ordinary life, which returns in "A Catholic modernity?"

The metaphysical affirmation of the ordinary means pushing the transcendent, the ideals, and the qualitative distinctions to the side and marginalizing them in favor of a gritty, rationalist realism of some fashion. Yet what that metaphysical position is meant to uphold is nothing less than the extension of dignity and human rights to *all persons*. Taylor's contention is that this project is philosophically unsustainable given the weak metaphysical architecture that has been built to support it. What we need, he wants to say, is precisely the metaphysics that the affirmation of the ordinary has traditionally sought to deny. In other words, we must retrieve the good – especially a good *beyond life* – while retaining the practical affirmation of ordinary life.

Taylor sees this tension as profoundly unsustainable and we thus face "an immanent revolt against the affirmation of life"; he calls that revolt "the possible fate of a culture that has aimed higher than its moral sources can sustain" (181). Secular universalism is unprecedentedly stringent in its demands on us to be generous, to be philanthropic, and to be respectful of all persons irrespective of any characteristics. This high standard is met with "the immense disappointments of actual human performance and with the myriad ways in which real, concrete human beings fall short of, ignore, parody, and betray this magnificent potential…one experiences a growing sense of anger and futility" (183).

One need only read a book like Peter Singer's *The Life You Can Save* – which demands that we give much more of our comfortable Western earnings to the wretchedly suffering elsewhere than we already do, in accordance with the pressing

demands of utilitarian arguments – to hear the exact kind of frustration and anguish that Taylor is pointing out here. Singer is an affirmer of life par excellence in *both* senses identified earlier – human life should be improved for as many people as possible, Singer argues passionately, but he gives no metaphysical argument for that claim. He thinks there are requirements on us Westerners that imply such "radically demanding implications" as the complete change of our lifestyles (19) – demands, not insignificantly, that will almost certainly never be practically met to the extent that he, as a good utilitarian, argues is *rationally* (!) called for. Taylor would argue here that these demands cannot be sustained by the metaphysical background Singer makes use of – that is, practically no metaphysics at all, beyond traditional utilitarian weighing. Thus, while Singer claims to be hopeful that we can increase our involvement in the betterment of mankind, his conclusion about our present condition is really almost unbearably bleak; we have failed utterly in his eyes (Cf. 22 where he despairs of our "failure to act," as well as the chapter "Why don't we give more?", 45-62).

Taylor next makes a bold claim: that modern secularism "leaves us with our own high sense of self-worth to keep us from backsliding, a high notion of human worth to inspire us forward, and a flaming indignation against wrong and oppression to energize us. It cannot appreciate how problematic all of these are, how easily they can slide into something trivial, ugly, or downright dangerous and destructive" ("Catholic," 185). By setting our standards as high as someone like Singer does, we are inevitably disappointed by the shortcomings of ourselves and

our fellows, and this disappointment can manifest itself in a kind of zealous, righteous indignation, a darkness that comes after the bright light of universalism.

How do we resolve this dilemma? At the end of "A Catholic modernity?" Taylor argues that Christian spirituality and opening ourselves up to God – that by seeing ourselves as children of God made in His image, we will have some sort of firmer ground on which to base our universalist sentiments – is a possible path out of the spiral of anger and zealotry (185-187). Exclusive humanism, he argues, is too limiting and reductionist to fully account for the goal of universalism that we are striving for. Taylor fully admits that this answer relies on faith, and indeed his account of that answer in those pages is rather sketchy. (This argument will be dealt with in more depth in chapter II C.)

A somewhat more rigorous account of retrieval is to be found in "Disenchantment-reenchantment." In one passage there Taylor considers the phenomenon of awe at the vastness and beauty of the universe and asks what the appropriate response to such a feeling would be. In the dominant, "disenchanted," scientific worldview, contemplation forces us to feel that "We are alone in the universe, and this is frightening, but it can also be exhilarating. There is a certain joy in solitude, particularly for the buffered identity" (295). Taylor sees this as fair enough but ultimately unsatisfying: "When we talk of our sense of wonder at the greatness and complexity of the universe, or of the love of the world it inspires in us, these are…strong evaluations. They carry the sense that wonder is what one should

feel, that someone who fails to sense this is missing something, is somehow insensitive to an object which really commands admiration" (297).

There is a fact of the matter about awe at the universe; that feeling is not simply a subjectivist response, nor the product of the reasoning of a disengaged individual self, but a feeling that carries weight for all of us. Awe, like all important human moral responses, inevitably brings with it *feelings of objectivity*. What we need to retrieve, in other words, is the conviction that "this wonder [at the world, the universe, etc.] is lived by us as a strong evaluation" (300). We cannot give up the notion that our responses strive towards objectivity, or toward something "out there" with which we are somehow in contact. The introduction of science into our worldview cannot eliminate all strong evaluations from our moral experience; according to Taylor, as we have seen, such a totally disengaged self is not a real option for us. Thus *complete* disenchantment is impossible. Reenchantment occurs when we grab hold of the strong evaluations that not even science can eliminate and hold them up as feelings about the objectivity of our responses.

What are we to make of this rather remarkable account of human moral behavior and what underlies it? Is Taylor right that the modern secular outlook is unsustainable and that we need to retrieve strong evaluations and Christian spirituality from its clutches? The issue of specifically Christian retrieval seems hard to evaluate philosophically. For those of us for whom belief in God is simply not a real option – let alone belief in Christ – the reliance on a particularly Christian metaphysics seems unnecessary, a culturally contingent choice that could just as

well rely on any other faith. Furthermore, Taylor's contention that secular universalism inevitably leads to disappointment seems to apply just as easily to religion as it does to secularism. In the wake of any major conflict religious or otherwise, any natural or manmade disaster, or human suffering in general, the question of how God could allow such a thing to happen inevitably arises. The issue of God's benevolence in the face of human realities seems at least as pressing as the issue of how universalist sentiments could be sustained by secular underpinnings alone – that is to say, very pressing indeed. So there seems little reason to turn immediately to religion in the face of such anxiety. (These criticisms are extended in chapter I C.)

What of the need for metaphysical ideals in general? Taylor's contention here that strong evaluations are pervasive throughout human moral life seems compelling, as are his arguments that those qualitative distinctions rely on a unique moral language and moral sources of which we need to be conscious. However, as we will see in later chapters, Taylor's insistence on transcendence as the key for our culture's success is a claim open to all sorts of attack and I will introduce a strong criticism of that strategy as a nihilistic one. Taylor's metaphysics will, in other words, be criticized later.

A puzzle arises here also. According to Taylor, *no matter what* the deniers say, goods are grounding every meaningful qualitative distinction we make. Thus, the goods themselves don't need be retrieved (since they are always with us), just our understanding or awareness of those goods. But how compelling is *that* project?

We can imagine universalistic goals far more modest than Peter Singer's. We don't even have to imagine them; they exist in places like Amnesty International or the United Nations Charter, which fight for and encode human rights without demanding that Americans stop going to the movies. It is hard to imagine an abstract project of philosophical anthropology better *grounding* such institutions than the secularism that has created them is already doing. (In tandem, however, with our later criticisms of transcendence in Part II will be criticisms of secular humanism; see chapter II D.) Human cynicism and intransigence might not be cured by philosophy.

Indeed, Taylor's contention is that a certain tradition in philosophy itself has blinded us to the reality and truth about strong evaluations. Throughout his writings on the issue of retrieval, it is always moral philosophy (utilitarianism and Kantianism especially), inspired by and working in tandem with rationalist science, that is the greatest avatar of misunderstandings about strong evaluation. Why then is *philosophy itself* his prescription for getting us away from such abstraction? The good is at work in us, Taylor says, whether we see it or not. Might he not be irrationally privileging philosophy as the tool to get us out of this quandary? In other words, would we, as Taylor insists perhaps dogmatically, really be better off for *increasing our understanding* of something that guides us anyway? Richard Rorty in an interview once said of truth that it is "indefinable. None the worse. We know how to use it, we don't need to define it." Perhaps the good works in something like that way, as evidenced by the great universalist revolution so praised by Taylor that

came about despite his anxiety about its philosophical underpinnings. Maybe we don't need philosophy to work with and for the good.

The role of philosophy in Taylor's project of retrieval is one that is therefore very much open to question. However, even so, it is hard to fault Taylor for his reliance on philosophy as a tool to interrogate such robustly moral questions as the ones we've been considering with him here. We can say with Taylor that it has been certain *kinds* of philosophy that have been wrong and damaging on these issues, not philosophy itself, and that better philosophy can retain the therapeutic role that he seems to think it can have. Thus Taylor's championing of philosophy as capable of addressing cultural issues such as the grounding of secular universalism, especially as compared with a much thinner and less compelling *naturalist* vision of philosophy's role that we will consider later, seems almost heroic – even if his conclusions are open to robust criticisms.

C. Living with Taylor's Myths and Mirages

In the essays "What does secularism mean?," "*Die blosse vernunft* ('Reason alone')," and "Perils of moralism," Taylor identifies two defining features of modern culture, connected to the traditions he has attacked that we have examined in I A-B, that he sees as intellectually pervasive but eminently questionable. Those features are (1) a "myth of the Enlightenment" and (2) what he calls "the modern moral order." These are both misguided families of beliefs that underlie how we think about our Western culture, Taylor argues, and despite their power over us and

despite what we've accomplished as a civilization under their guidance, both features of our culture are ultimately unsustainable and ought at least to be better understood, if not outright dismantled. Because Taylor wants in these essays, as he does throughout his work, to retrieve discarded ways of thinking in order to better ground and situate our contemporary ideals and goals, he sees the naturalist/secular narrative about the Enlightenment and the modern moral order of rights-bearing individuals protected by "civilizational" codes of conduct as fundamentally inadequate to serve their desired goals and ultimately incomplete as explanations of our ideals as well as of our historical situation.

What I want to explore here is to what extent we as a culture need the grounding Taylor says we do, and ultimately I'll argue that Taylor's anxiety about these alleged misunderstandings is misplaced and that we can live (and indeed have been living) with the myths and mirages that he sees as so damaging. I call this criticism of religion's role as an alternative the *first level* of objection to Taylor's diagnosis of secular modernity. (We will see the *second level*, having to do with the need for transcendence, in Part II.)

What does Taylor mean when he says there is a "myth of the Enlightenment"? He sees the myth as the notion that the Enlightenment represented "an absolute, unmitigated move from a realm of thought full of error and illusion to one where the truth is at last available" ("Reason alone," 326). Before we relied on God, the Great Chain of Being, the Forms, whatever metaphysical mumbo-jumbo you like, but now we have the tools of reason (especially natural science) to guide us,

and whatever predates those tools is to be discarded as relics of an earlier, less sophisticated epoch. Thus we have the idea "that human-centered political thought is a more reliable guide to answer the questions in its domain than theories informed by political theology" (328); he cites Rawls's and Habermas's separate but similar prohibitions of any but the most neutral (i.e., secularist) public language. We might also add the more recent cultural cachet of the so-called New Atheism (Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett) that sees religion as wholly irrational and consequently views modern science as an unambiguous and vast improvement over those dark ages.

The myth, in short, relies on a Whiggish history of a progression to the Enlightenment that fails to see the Enlightenment "as involving important gains, for instance, discoveries of truth, or framing of new and advantageous conceptualizations, which also brought certain losses, occluding or forgetting some understandings of virtue which were in our world before" (326). The privileging of the nonreligious over the religious that the myth encourages is "utterly without foundation" because any normative claim that the nonreligious makes – e.g., plumping for "the right to life" based on the rationality of the person – fails to be "legitimately convincing to any honest, unconfused thinker" since reason is no "surer basis for this right than the fact that we are made in the image of God" (328-329). Furthermore, the shift from the religious to the nonreligious fails to be unambiguous in the sense that "The refutation of Aristotelian physics is one thing, that of all religions quite another" (332). Scientific progress is much narrower than a refutation of all religious belief, and fails to necessarily come into conflict with all

that falls under the mantle of the religious; to say otherwise is "a notion of reductive explanation whereby the methods of natural science do or will eventually suffice to explain the phenomena of human life" (332). Such is the general outline of Taylor's dispute with the myth about the Enlightenment, which he sees as simplistic and a failure to appreciate what has been lost as well as gained.

At the end of "'Reason alone'" Taylor makes some comments about his disputes with the Enlightenment myth that go a long way toward shedding light on what is deficient in his criticisms. He notes that the 'darkness to light' narrative "consists in the invoking of such strange metaphysical entities as a law which holds since time out of mind, regardless of the incompatible positive legislation which may have crept in for a time; or of a cosmic order arranging different levels of being in a hierarchy" (342). It is far from obvious, though, why a 'darkness to light' narrative necessarily needs to invoke metaphysical laws in order to justify itself. Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for example, sees the history of science as clearly involving *progress* but not necessarily the attunement of science to any objective *truths* "out there." Kuhn argues in *Structure* that science can be described as "a process of evolution *from* primitive beginnings – a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But nothing that has been said or will be said makes it a process of evolution *toward* anything" (170-171). Progress can instead be described "in terms of evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time" (171).

So there are just better ways of explaining things, maybe couched in the language of "accuracy," "efficiency," and other value-laden terms, but not in *metaphysical* terms (Cf. Kuhn, 199-200). Thus Taylor paints too broadly when he mockingly says that the myth-holders think that, "At a certain point, we stepped out of the shadow of superworldly frameworks, and saw reality *for what it was*" (my emphasis, "'Reason'", 343). A Kuhnian wouldn't say we saw reality for "what it was," but that we started seeing reality in a way that was better for us or from our perspective. Kuhn's vision of intellectual progress is admittedly probably a lot more nuanced than the Enlightenment myth Taylor is attacking here – but it is still an account, when applied to domains other than science, that is capable of making room for progress in processes like the Enlightenment, and as I'll argue, the fact that the so-called myth and an account like Kuhn's both see progress here means that the difference between the two is ultimately not that great.

Taylor notes that "we may hear contemporaries say that with modernity, we realized that there was no divinely sanctioned social order, and that we now have to devise laws on our own, human authority, [even though] this was far from the conclusions drawn in earlier centuries" (344). We can agree with Taylor that the shift to Enlightenment may not have been *unmitigated* but we should question whether or not our predecessors "in earlier centuries" were not fundamentally misguided in insisting on a "divinely sanctioned social order," a possibility not alluded to in Taylor's formulation there of the issue, though he would doubtless agree that this represents an improvement. At the very least, a divinely sanctioned social order was worse for more people than the democratic progress the

Enlightenment brought about. The progress we have achieved doesn't have to be unmitigated for it to be a clear improvement.

There is a tone of sour grapes here, as when Taylor, discussing the erroneous folding of the social sciences under the banner of natural science, notes that "there has never been, and probably never will be, any convergence on a paradigm" in the social sciences (345) and that therefore all normative claims following from the social sciences are questionable. It is hard to think of any but the most radical naturalist (who probably wouldn't have much respect for the social sciences anyway!) disagreeing with the idea that science provides always-revisable truths, *especially* when it comes to questions about human social ordering.

In other words, Taylor seems to be quibbling here when he talks about a myth of the Enlightenment. He makes no move to argue that the Enlightenment *hasn't* provided progress, so he disputes *the terms* in which that progress is couched. He also pushes for acknowledgement of the losses that progress leaves in its wake. But we can refine the narrative about the Enlightenment to address Taylor's concerns – about metaphysical laws, unmitigated progress, convergence in the social sciences, and so on – and come to more or less *the same conclusion* about what the Enlightenment means as the myth would have it. We say so in a different style, and we acknowledge various ambiguities that come along with it, but we still end up thinking that the Enlightenment represented a vast instrumental, practical, and political improvement. Thus Taylor's concerns look ultimately cosmetic – since he can't dispute this larger overall point about genuine progress, so he instead makes

criticisms of its vocabulary and so on because it has sidelined the Christianity he believes in.

What then of Taylor's other target, the "modern moral order"? He defines this feature of our culture as embodying three principles: "(1) the rights and liberties of the members [of society], (2) the equality among them (which has of course been variously interpreted, and has mutated toward more radical conceptions over time), and (3) the principle that rule is based on consent (which has also been defended in more or less radical forms)" ("What does secularism mean?", 318). This conception followed from Cartesian epistemology and modern natural science (329-331). Even more fundamentally, the modern moral order embodies the obsession with codes of conduct in Western culture, what Taylor calls *nomolatry*. The roots of this phenomenon are traceable to Christianity, where the move was towards an attempt "to make people over as more perfect practicing Christians, through articulating codes and inculcating disciplines. Until the Christian life became more and more identified with these codes and disciplines" ("Perils of moralism," 351). In other words, the emphasis became on making sure our ways of acting were in accordance with Christian teachings and values. From this paradigm followed the codification of *rights* that comes down to us presently as what Taylor calls the modern moral order.

What's wrong with our rights culture and the modern moral order that it represents, according to Taylor? It all misses what he refers to as the "vertical dimension" of our moral thinking. Beyond the mere arbitration between two parties/options (the "horizontal dimension," derived from the apodictic model of

reasoning), the vertical is the envisioning of new possibilities – the condition "in which our relations can be potentially transformed, and our moral predicament altered" (361). Seeing moral conflict as just between conflicting claims to certain *rights* as well as conflicting *obligations* makes the conflicts seem too "tractable" and therefore able to be solvable by mere codifications. I take this objection to be Taylor's most powerful, and one he shares, with some differences in presentation, with the work of Bernard Williams.

What is less persuasive, however, is why the alternative to this flawed conception of moral life involves Christianity. Earlier Taylor argues that, "Christian faith can never be decanted into a fixed code. Because it always places our actions in two dimensions, one of right action, and also an eschatological dimension" (350). The fact that the Christian way of life is not reducible to codes shows for Taylor that it is a richer moral conception. This argument comes in the same essay that he traces the very modern moral order under attack to Christianity itself! The implication is that the not-to-be-reduced-to-codes Christianity is the purer one while the rights-based Christianity is somehow an historical aberration. Why we should take this distinction to be the case, however, is far from clear, historically or philosophically speaking.

His second argument, by implication, for the Christian alternative is one also found in the essay "A Catholic modernity?" but which is present here in "Perils of moralism." This is the argument that the extremely high demands placed on us as moral agents by the modern moral order are insufficiently grounded by the

secularist language and forms of life that have been built to support those demands. We are led by the modern moral order to such "terrible consequences" as violence, "righteous anger," and frustration at the failure of our fellows to live up to those impossibly high standards (362-363). The problem here, of course, is obvious – all these "terrible consequences" are ones embodied *time and time again by religious obligations and forms of life*. Christianity has inspired the zealotry, violence, and righteous anger that Taylor argues quite rightly is also a risk for the modern moral order, precisely for the reasons he posits are risks for us now (we won't be able to live up to the standards, we will be frustrated by each other's failings, we will try and inevitably fail to be "pure of heart," etc.). So again, on this second argument, the Christian alternative fails to look more attractive.

Does the modern moral outlook have anything going for it? Despite the myriad criticisms leveled against it (dutifully marshaled by Taylor) – Christian, Romantic, Nietzschean, and more – it has succeeded in giving us the ideal of universal human rights in a more pervasive and persuasive way than ever before. (Taylor discusses this very issue in "A Catholic modernity?") The modern moral order almost certainly rests on the thin, horizontal notion of conflicts of rights that Taylor and others have criticized. The question is whether we can live with those thin notions and the world they have imparted to us. While Taylor's criticisms sound much more fundamental here in this domain than they do in that of the Enlightenment myth, here again we can accept in practice the state of affairs he is so worried about, without conservatively denying the problems the modern moral outlook carries along with it. As we will consider later, however, there may be

philosophical options, such as Nietzschean anti-humanism, for grounding modernity that rely neither on Taylor's transcendence nor on secular humanism.

Hilary Putnam once said that "what has weight in our lives should also have weight in philosophy" (70). Taylor, in attacking the modern moral order, gives weight to his philosophical concerns while conceding that in actual practice the order has largely succeeded. He has not given sufficient weight, in my view, to the life of the modern moral order. That being said, the extension of human rights is extremely far from perfect or ideal, and Taylor identifies several elements that show that the life of the modern moral order has profound shortcomings (violence, frustration), but, and here is the main point of my *first level* of objection to Taylor's critiques of secular modernity, nothing in Taylor's own account, which offers an unsatisfying Christian alternative to what exists now with immanent secular humanism, gives us a better prospect of continuing the fight for universalism than what we already have in the field. Here again, as with his dispute with the Enlightenment myth, Taylor's philosophical anxiety seems largely overblown and misplaced, especially to an unbeliever.

D. Williams Takes On the System: The Peculiar Institution and Realistic Naturalism

So far we've considered Taylor's transcendental human agency and his diagnosis of modernity as an example of an alternative vision to mainstream moral theory. We turn now to compare Taylor with a strong naturalist philosopher –

Bernard Williams – who shares many of Taylor's criticisms of formalist and utilitarian moral theory but who argues for a strikingly different conception of the role of philosophy. The point of comparison with Williams will also bring to light the strongly non-naturalist aspects of Taylor's philosophical program and the virtues of his prominent place for philosophy in addressing questions that face us as a culture. Here I'll discuss Williams' critique of the morality system and his realistic naturalism, comparing his account of internal reasons with Taylor's argument about attunement to the good. I conclude that the dispute on internal reasons and Williams' thin role for philosophy in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* show the much stronger role philosophy has for the non-naturalist Taylor in discussing attunement and moral action and groundings for our culture.

Williams' book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* can be read as a sustained demolition of the pretenses of moral theory, according to which moral life can be reduced to some discrete set of rules (the categorical imperative, the principle of utility) and the particular goods associated with those rules. An important story Williams has to tell has to do with moral theory's dependence on a particular view of *rationality* that ultimately distorts its ethical conclusions. This obsession with rationality makes moral theory *impersonal* and *reductionist*. Williams' skepticism about philosophical rationality is manifest in his discussion of the exaggerated necessity of ethical theory, his insistence on the need for humanism in moral philosophy, his unfavorable comparison of ethics with science, his argument that reflection destroys ethical knowledge, and most forcefully, his attack in chapter 10 on the "morality system" and its notion of obligation. For Williams, rationality is not

enough to motivate us to be good, and consequently his program rejects all moral theory that relies on it. What Williams stands against is relatively easy to glean from his critical writings about these issues; less obvious are his positive recommendations to move beyond the styles of philosophy he dislikes so much. I'll argue that his "skepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics" (74) leads him to a vision of the ethical life that somehow tries to move *beyond philosophy* and is therefore difficult to pin down in philosophical terms.

I'll sketch the aspects mentioned above of Williams' articulations of the limits of philosophical rationality. First is his argument that *reason is not enough to motivate us* to make ethical decisions: "one could never get to the required result, the entry into the ethical world, just from the consideration of the *should* or *ought* of rational agency itself, the *should* of the practical question" (61). Rational agency is impersonal in that assumes its prescriptions, the reasons for acting it hands down, to be ironclad for all. In a reference to Rawls' original position argument in *A Theory of Justice*, Williams argues that "it is not a persuasive test for what you should reasonably do if you are not already concerned with justice. Unless you are already disposed to take an impartial or moral point of view, you will see as highly unreasonable the proposal that the way to decide what to do is to ask what rules you would make if you had none of your actual advantages, or did not know what they were" (64). In other words, we need what he elsewhere calls *internal reasons*, our personal projects and commitments, to properly motivate us. Appeals to rationality – which is purported to apply to *everyone*, all "citizen[s] of a republic

governed by these notional laws" (63) – cannot fully encompass the depth, complexity, and diversity of those really powerful reasons.

Rationality conceived of in that way carries with it the "belief that you can look critically at all your dispositions from the outside, from the point of view of the universe"; in contrast, Williams makes the more modest claim that "neither the psychology nor the history of ethical reflection gives much reason to believe that the theoretical reasonings of the cool hour can do without a sense of the moral shape of the world, of the kind given in the everyday dispositions" (110). Just as we require internal reasons for action, our reflections cannot rest upon the universal laws of rationality, but rather upon more local cosmologies and forms of life. Instead of striving towards "the point of view of the universe," ethics should instead aim "to help us to construct a world that will be our world, one in which we have a social, cultural, and personal life" (111). That activity is not theoretical in nature – we don't need ethical theory to achieve those goals of constructing our world. Casting ethical theory aside does not mean that "the only alternative…is to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice. Theory and prejudice are not the only possibilities for an intelligent agent, or for philosophy" (112).

Indeed, one of Williams' prescriptions for what philosophy should be doing is to orient itself towards "a human point of view" (118), to see the great diversity of the sources of our commitments and value them as something more than mere prejudices: "Theory typically uses the assumption that we probably have too many ethical ideas, some of which may well turn out to be mere prejudices. Our major

problem now is actually that we have not too many but too few, and we need to cherish as many as we can" (117). Ethical theory offers a bewitching but false transcendental dream that "reason drives us to get beyond humanity" (119) when we should be striving to create better lives for human beings by attuning ourselves to our practical concerns *qua* human beings, which Williams refers to as humanism.

Alongside this stirring appeal to humanism, though, is a puzzling discussion of science and ethics in chapter 8. The argument there is that science is capable of genuine convergence in knowledge but ethics is not: "science has some chance of being what it seems, a systematized theoretical account of how the world really is, while ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems" (135). Here Williams states firmly what exactly constitute the *limits of philosophy*, and the limits are at the level of creating "any adequate, still less systematic body of ethical knowledge [at the level of reflection], and I think that the outcome of my earlier discussion of ethical theory has shown that, at least as things are, no such body of knowledge exists" (148).

There is a puzzling irony here, however. In taking as a virtue of his anti-theoretical approach to ethics to be its avoidance of the pretensions of moral theory to strive, like science, towards "an objective and determinate grounding in considerations about human nature" (153), Williams strikes a note similar to, for example, A.J. Ayer's emotivist ethics (all value judgments are subjective, while science alone is objective) in *Language, Truth and Logic* (Cf. chapter VI, pp. 102-119), in the spirit of their appraisals of the truth abilities of ethics relative to science.

Both Williams and Ayer think that ethics pales in comparison to science when it comes to objectivity, and both adopt alternate approaches to ethics that recognize the humbler status of ethical thinking. Both are enamored of science and think ethics is a little too smug and therefore needs to be taken down a peg. That Williams the anti-reductionist humanist ends up sounding like a logical positivist is perhaps an ironic result of his placement in the history of British analytic philosophy.[2]

Another element of Williams' skepticism about rationality is his argument that reflection destroys ethical knowledge. Again, the comparison with science showed that an objective body of ethical knowledge is a pipedream and such a hope does not stand up to scrutiny, while the less modest ethical conclusions that likely follow from the rejection of that paradigm "would not satisfy the conditions of propositional knowledge" (167). The upshot here is that for Williams this loss isn't such a big deal – to think it is a major loss for us is to "share the error of thinking that what conviction in ethical life has to be is knowledge, that it must be a mode of certainty" (169). This desire for certainty, shared by liberals and traditionalists alike, likely comes from the epistemological tradition and the view of rationality at issue here that follows from it. Ethical convictions come not from rational certainty but from *confidence*, "basically a social phenomenon" (170), "a practical convergence, on a shared way of life" (171). Using the confidence model and shirking off the certainty paradigm, "the basic question is how to live and what to do" (171), questions which are not exclusively *moral* in question.

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[2] It is also worth noting, though it is beyond the scope of my topic here, that little of Williams' earlier skepticism about rationality creeps into his discussion of science and his adoption of a form of scientific realism. This may also have to do with Williams' analytic heritage.

This narrow or "closed" quality of morality brings us to Williams' discussion of the "morality system" in chapter 10. Here lies his searing indictment of the "philosophical mistakes…woven into morality":

> It misunderstands obligations, not seeing how they form just one type of ethical consideration. It misunderstands practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to the ethical. It misunderstands ethical practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to obligations. Beyond all this, morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life. (196)

Morality's reliance on obligations that are "inescapable," which can never conflict with one another, which always have priority above all else that we care about, and which have a monopoly on practical necessity (the feelings of *must* and *should* that grip us) means that morality rests on nothing less than a "misconception of life."

In contrast to these mistakes, Williams wants to think of obligations as "merely one kind of ethical consideration among others" which means finding "a relative notion of importance, which we might also express by saying that someone *finds* a given thing important" (182). The abstract and general importance that obligations purport to carry does not grip us in the way that our personal commitments and projects do. Moral obligation does not trump those local relative

imports that we care about; in fact the *immediacy* of our concerns makes those concerns more compelling to us; the morality system ignores immediacy altogether as irrational (186). Thus we prioritize among things that matter to us and it is by no means obvious that moral obligations always or necessarily come out on top as the morality system dictates they will.

The morality system crucially rests on a faulty conception of practical reason in which normative feelings of *ought* or *must* come from the ethical alone and never from base desires and personal inclinations (190-191). Furthermore, this picture of practical reason falsely implies that we always *have reasons* for acting: "Perhaps he [some moral agent] had no reason at all" (192). From this reasons picture, we get the notion of blame which is "best seen as involving a fiction, by which we treat the agent as one for whom the relevant ethical considerations are reasons" (193). The reasons picture fails ultimately because the ironclad laws of morality "cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less. It is an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met" (194).

Thus we see what Williams means when he says that morality is not only philosophically specious but also misconceives ethical life itself. If we throw out the morality system, where do we go from here? At the end of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams heaps scorn on this question by saying that it implies a false choice between the certainties of the morality system and some great unknown that lies beyond it. In fact, he argues, without the morality system we have all kinds of

considerations about what makes human life valuable and important that we should be relying on anyway. These personal "dispositions" make "social and personal life" important and interesting (201).

What can *philosophy* tell us about these dispositions? Given that Williams admits that he is a skeptic about philosophy itself, the implication is that it can't say very much at all. Indeed, in the "Postscript" to *ELP* Williams trumpets history and the social sciences as vehicles for increasing our self-understanding, while we already saw that in chapter 8 he sees science as better at talking about reality than philosophical ethics can ever hope to do. For Williams it seems that the traditional methods of philosophical argument can be used to dismantle the oppressive architecture that the philosophical morality system has built, but that once we take it down philosophy isn't going to help us very much at all.

So all this talk about dispositions and the use of the social sciences seems pretty thin, philosophically speaking (which I take it is precisely the point). A richer picture of William's project can be gleaned by his account of internal reasons. Williams is a strong internal reasons theorist. This commits him to the position that "there are only internal reasons for action" ("Internal reasons and the obscurity of blame," 35). His account of what internal reasons are, where they come from, and how they behave is strictly naturalistic, or as he would have it, realistic – that is to say, he relies on descriptive facts of human psychology, behavior, and culture to account for what motivates and causes us to act, without appeal to the ethical domain. A naturalist moral psychology in Williams' sense (and also, according to his

interpretation, in Nietzsche's) "explains moral capacities in terms of psychological structures that are not distinctively moral" ("Nietzsche's minimalist moral psychology," 67).[3] I'll provide an account of Williams' internal reasons theory, especially his distinction between naturalism and realism, his account of blaming and proleptic mechanisms, and his emphasis on the vagueness and obscurity of ethical life. I conclude that his naturalist/realist account of internal reasons precludes him from recourse to any talk involving attunement to goods and ideals that it would be hard to deny have some external ontological status; this exclusion from his story is the crux of his difference with a non-naturalist account of reasons for action such as the one offered by Taylor.

Williams is inspired by Nietzsche, whom he interprets as offering a minimalist moral psychology that is not merely naturalistic but realistic. This distinction is a crucial one because naturalism on its own – explanation of the moral strictly in terms that "can be applied equally to every part of nature…[or] to something else" ("Nietzsche's," 67) – assumes in its very structure that one knows the definitions of "natural" and "moral" and how those domains are differentiated. The question of what counts as a "natural" explanation is seen by Williams as an impossible one to answer (68). Instead Williams strives for a moral psychology that (1) sees "our accounts of distinctively moral activity" as adding "as little as possible" to our understanding of "other human activity," and (2) "[identifies] an excess of

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[3] Jonathan Lear argues that Williams' "approach to ethical life requires that we turn to human psychology; and the form of psychology will have to be of a broadly psychoanalytic bent" (515). He sketches a picture of how "psychoanalysis becomes the obvious place to look to fill out a broadly naturalist approach to the understanding of ethical life" (517). See that paper for an interesting interpretation of Williams' psychological naturalism.

moral content in psychology by appealing first to what an experienced, honest, subtle, and optimistic interpreter might make of human behavior elsewhere" (68). This position Williams terms a realistic minimalist moral psychology. It is not merely naturalistic because it isn't relying on some "already defined scientific program, but rather [on] an informed interpretation of some human experiences and activities in relation to others" (68). Still, insofar as it explains moral behavior in non-moral terms, it can be said to be a kind of naturalism.

Williams puts forth a naturalist-based criticism of blame, which in its typical conception would require the existence of external reasons and therefore the entire notion of blaming would be "suspect" ("Internal reasons," 41), which exemplifies a psychologically realistic critique. Instead, Williams argues that blame can be thought of as applying to people who do have reasons among their "actual motivational set" (called 'S'; note the naturalist inflection of the appeal to the "actual" here), or among the range of their dispositions, but who fail to apply those reasons correctly. Williams wants a "focused blame" that involves "treating the person who is blamed like someone who had a reason to do the right thing but did not do it" (42). Getting an agent to accept that he has internal reasons or dispositions to do the right thing involves a "sound deliberative route" from the examination of those reasons and dispositions to acting correctly. The most important element of the sound deliberative route involves "proleptic mechanisms" such as the desire for respect of one's peers, or more obscurely, the need to deliberate on one's reasons to come up with a different ethical conclusion (42).

The major virtue of this account of blame is taken to be its psychological

realism (44). By contrast, externalism about reasons "offers no route to a concrete

psychological understanding of the relations between the agent's reasons, his failure

to act in the desired way, and the content of blame" (44). There's something too neat

in Williams' opinion about externalism's certainty about what constitutes reasons.

Internalism acknowledges that "It *is* often vague what one has a reason to do" (38);

Williams refer to this attitude as "intelligible obscurity" about what constitutes

reasons and when blame gets applied (44). So if all this talk about sound

deliberative routes and proleptic mechanisms sounds obscure – How do I *know* that

I have a reason not to do something I think I really want to do? How powerful are

these psychological dispositions (e.g., to avoid disrespect) in reality? – that is

because the psychological reality of the process really is itself obscure and complex.

So psychological realism reveals the complexity of our ethical lives and if we are to

be realists in this sense we should embrace that complexity. Realism does the job of

correcting misconceptions about moral experience.

So Williams' account of internal reasons totally rejects all external reasons

and relies on a totally "realistic" account of human psychological dispositions to

explain those internal reasons. In "Internal reasons and the obscurity of blame,"

Williams asks why sound deliberative routes can only be drawn for internal reasons

and not for external reasons such as prudence or morality. His answer is that

everyone is committed to correcting errors of fact and reasoning but that not

everybody is committed to prudence and morality – and if they are committed to the

latter two, those reasons become internalized in virtue of their membership in S;

even if they do function as real reasons (a prospect which is, again, not universal for all persons), they cannot be external (36-37). When reasons get internalized in this way, what happens to them? They become just more members of S – "the set of [one's] desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects, and so on" (35); they become, in effect, psychological facts, just more dispositions that we happen to have.

While reasons function normatively for us internally, our *acquisition* of them carries no normative force in and of itself. There are reasons *to do the right thing* according to Williams, but there are no reasons that are themselves *worthy for us to have* or *worthy for us to love*. These latter two formulations are explicit and important parts of Taylor's account of reasons. According to Taylor, there are "three axes" of our moral thinking: (1) what we ought to do (obligations to others), (2) what we ought to be (virtues), and (3) what we ought to love (goods) (*Sources of the Self*, 15). (3) involves "the nature of the good that I orient myself by and…the way I am placed in relation to it" (50).

So somehow Taylor wants to provide an account of internal reasons by way of "orientation to the good" (47). The three axes are internal in the sense that they form part of our "set of…desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects, and so on" in Williams' phrase. Still, for Taylor, we orient ourselves to a good, which cannot be a mere internal disposition. So once we attune ourselves to certain goods, they become part of the fabric of our being; they are not crude external obligations that apply to all persons regardless of their personal situation and character of the sort criticized by Williams. Goods for Taylor become the basis of our most fundamental

human commitments. Indeed, the axes are nothing less than "constitutive of human agency…stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood" (27). Our attunement to the good via these "horizons" or "frameworks" is a fact about us, a way that we inescapably behave. Attunement to anything external to motivate action, however, is totally anathema to Williams' conception, especially when that external point of attunement is something with as much metaphysical baggage as "the good" that is referred to in *Sources of the Self*.

So the difference between Williams and Taylor on internal reasons comes down to the issue of naturalism. Taylor explicitly relies on "a given ontology of the human" to explain our moral behavior; naturalism "has tried to hive off" this ontology for a variety of reasons: ontology constitutes an "invention"; it is too far from the scientific understanding of the world; it violates the naturalists' "distrust" of higher forms of life as against an "unspoiled human nature," and so on (*Sources*, 5, 19). This non-naturalistic ontology involves goods and ideals that are *worthy of our love*. Williams, by contrast, relies as we have seen on an explicitly naturalistic/realistic account of the reasons that motivate us, rejecting any moral explanations that come down via moral terms. Williams would say that if we are ever motivated by ideals/goods, they just become internal psychological facts (Cf. "Internal reasons," 37). So Williams has a psychological account of the human but little if any in the way of an ontological one.

Thus Williams would reject the idea of us being motivated by goods or by our "attunement to the good" in Taylor's phrase, and would express puzzlement at Taylor's insistence that the internalization of these goods is "not just…a contingently true psychological fact about human beings" (*Sources*, 27) but something true in a deep sense about our transcendental human agency. Talking about frameworks, horizons, and goods to which we attune ourselves would probably smack for Williams too much of externalism, though Taylor still wants to say that these processes do function for us as real internal reasons.

While Taylor dislikes talk of mere psychological facts, that kind of talk is precisely Williams' provenance in explaining internal reasons. Recall also Williams' argument that not all persons are interested in prudence and morality while all of us are interested in getting facts and reasoning right. Taylor would totally disagree: our attunement to goods is nothing less than constitutive of human agency!

The issue of attunement seems to be the issue the two would spar most on when it comes to internal reasons, and the reason for this difference is their differing reactions to naturalism. As a strict naturalist/realist, Williams is committed to just internal reasons, dispositions, and psychological facts to explain our moral behavior. As a strong non-naturalist with Christian commitments, Taylor wants to say that we are inescapably attuned to goods that are worthy of us to love that nevertheless, despite some obscure but important external ontological reality, function internally. Without any naturalist proclivities, Taylor is free to argue that

attunement is an inescapable fact; Williams' much narrower account – indeed, his minimalist moral psychology, borrowed from Nietzsche – precludes any such talk.

So even though Taylor and Williams have similar negative criticisms of formalist and utilitarian theory, they have serious differences on the issue of internal reasons. This distinction brings out their differing conceptions of what philosophy should be doing. Taylor's philosophical vision is, it seems to me, much richer and more complex than Williams' minimalist sketches. Williams would be deeply skeptical of Taylor's project of a moral ontology in search of our sources of the good, though Taylor's "hypergoods" don't function in the way that the morality system's iron obligations do. The Williams of chapter 8 of *ELP* would also disapprove of Taylor's harsh criticisms of naturalism.

Somehow the conflict between Taylor the non-naturalist and Williams the naturalist comes down to their position on what philosophy is good for. While Williams seems to think that we need to get beyond philosophical theory somehow to reach what he calls "truthfulness" and to think about history and science and our psychological dispositions, Taylor is always worried about the philosophical underpinnings of our ways of thinking and being, and wants to conceive of a program of strengthening our underpinnings through ontologizing, tracing moral sources, and retrieving the good and outmoded ways of thinking. Williams doesn't take philosophical underpinnings to be worth saving at all – in fact, philosophy is usually providing us with deeply misguided underpinnings (blame, practical necessity, obligation), so we should be abandoning them and attuning our lives to

something else. To what exactly do we attune ourselves? Our existing dispositions about what is important, or something like that, guide our actions; attunement doesn't even seem to be the right way to think about William's picture here. As a vision of how to think about these issues going forward from the wreckage of chapter 10, this is a sketchy one that calls for more fleshing out, while the negative side of Williams' project, the demolition of the mistakes and pretensions of theory, seems much more powerful and persuasive than his positive philosophical prescriptions, and as I'll continue to argue in the next few chapters, Taylor's picture of what philosophy should be doing is more compelling than Williams' minimalism. The issue of the power of the good, covered in chapter I E, will bring out this distinction.

E. Disputing "the Power of the Good"

Both Williams and Taylor express deep dissatisfaction with modern mainstream moral philosophy – utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractualism, and so on – which they argue is deeply reductionist, perversely proceduralist, and generally removed from genuine human interests and dispositions. Modern moral theory is taken to be incapable of truly capturing the essence of our ethical lives, and too thin to properly motivate us to live well. Something else is at work in our ethical lives, both Williams and Taylor think, but they disagree on how to formulate *what ethical importance consists in*. For Taylor, the issue is one of *strong evaluation*, the qualitative distinctions about what is right/worthy and wrong/base in our ways of

being, as well as *attunement to the good*. His conception, then, is one in which values are constitutive of what importance means for us; values have *power* that imposes on us ways of living and being. For Williams, on the other hand, obligations are primarily of a *practical*, not a value-laden, nature, involving our *dispositions* which must be explained in terms that go beyond the vocabulary of philosophy alone. Williams thinks that Taylor overestimates the efficacy of values and the good.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams identifies the concept of obligations as a defining feature of the morality system that he wants to do away with. Remember that there he argues that "there is a pressure within the morality system to represent every consideration that goes into a deliberation and yields a particular obligation as being itself a general obligation; so if I am now under an obligation to do something that would be for the best, this will be because I have some general obligation, perhaps among others, to do what is for the best" (175). Against these general/universal obligations (think of the principle of utility or of the categorical imperative), Williams talks about "a relative notion of importance, which we might also express by saying that someone *finds* a given thing important" (182), a diverse set of personal projects in which each person assigns to himself/herself different levels of "deliberative priority," or different sets of considerations about what to do and how to be, among which 'morality' is but one *personalized* consideration (184). Later he speaks of "individuals with dispositions of character and a life of their own to live" (201) as central to his conception of what importance means; this understanding privileges "everyday dispositions" over theoretical reflection and "the point of view of the universe" (110).

Taylor agrees that the conception of morality involving ironclad obligations against which Williams argues constitutes "a terrible constriction of ethical thinking" ("A most peculiar institution," 133). But he quickly wants to distinguish his own view of what trumps obligations from Williams' talk about importance, replacing that conception with a "more old-fashioned terminology and [instead] speak of 'good' and 'goods'" (134). Here strong evaluation rears its head: "our sense of what we ought to do or be is shaped by the (strongly valued) goods we acknowledge, and that the obligations we recognize hold against this background" (134). What importance means for Taylor, then, intimately involves goods to which we attune ourselves: "I see my self, and also I must say modern culture, as deeply committed both to these ideals, for example, universal justice and benevolence, and to the goals which contend with them for space in our lives, the various notions of personal fulfillment, or those definitions of a worthwhile life" (153). As he puts it in *Sources of the Self*, "we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and…we cannot be indifferent to our place relative to the good" (47).

Williams is deeply suspicious of Taylor's "notions of the *power* of the good, notions which carry Platonic or Christian resonances. Some time before this point is reached, Taylor will rightly have expected me to part from him, suspicious of the 'siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers,' in Nietzsche's words, calling 'you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!'" ("Replies," 203). Williams sees Taylor as groping too quickly for "a deeply ethical kind of importance," one reliant on "value rather than…mere desire" (205). Instead of seeing our obligations as articulations of our attunement to the good, Williams has a starkly different picture:

our obligations "relate basically to needs that are very everyday. It is just because the needs involved are so elementary that the psychological mechanisms designed to meet those needs are demanding; and it is because those mechanisms are demanding that the theory which grows around them becomes so dense and oppressive" (205). So we might sum up this dispute as involving a disagreement over the origin of obligations and the sources of ethical importance.

In talking about our orientation to the good, what is Taylor guilty of exactly, according to Williams? For one thing, Williams seems to think that Taylor is falling prey to the temptation to tell a grand narrative about our ethical lives, the kind of narrative that Williams argues "tend[s] to be optimistic, self-serving, superstitious, vengeful, or otherwise not what [it] seem[s] to be" (204). Williams wants a narrower account involving our dispositions, psychological states (including desire), and historical backgrounds. This view he terms *naturalism*, an ostensive definition of which he provides with the rule to "never explain the ethical in terms of something special to ethics if you can explain it in terms that apply to the non-ethical as well" (204).

The kind of big story being told by Taylor about the good seems to Williams to ignore the everyday, most basic constitutive features of our dispositions and feelings, turning away from the personal to concepts of a deeply, maybe even exclusively *ethical* nature. Indeed, that story is even potentially *politically* dangerous, Williams seems to fear according to the above passage. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere, he gives the impression that he wants to take

ethics down a notch from its metaphysical pretentions, to make it earthier and more real, to make it humbler. Taylor frustrates all of these goals. Taylor thinks the good has power over us; Williams, it seems, simply does not.

So despite the misgivings he shares with Williams about the narrowness, reductionism, and proceduralism of post-Kantian theory, Taylor really couldn't be farther from Williams on these issues. Indeed, Taylor employs a specific vocabulary throughout his work, including in his essay on Williams, meant to identify this exact source of disagreement. Williams is working with two modern concepts to express his qualms about Taylor's project – *naturalism* and *the (metaphysical) affirmation of ordinary life* – which Taylor rightly sees as hostile to his project of the retrieval of the good. In seeking a more modest ("naturalist") account of importance and obligations, Williams wants to cut out talk of the good; in seeing talk of the good as too far from the "everyday," Williams is privileging ordinary life over the higher goods. Despite his insights into the mistakes of moral theory, Williams is still very much steeped in the tradition Taylor is disagreeing with throughout his work.

Given this state of disagreement, and the clarity of Williams' rejection of Taylor's positive program, what might Taylor say about Williams' rather more obscure positive suggestions? We have already seen why Taylor sees importance and dispositions as too thin. He would presumably think the same about Williams' concept of *confidence* as the source of ethical convictions. Taylor would like, however, that Williams has no interest in rational certainty of the Cartesian sort, and he would also be attracted to the notion of confidence as "basically a social

phenomenon" (*ELP,* 170), in keeping with Taylor's own interest in communal "webs of interlocution" (*Sources*, 36).

Nevertheless, confidence in *ELP* is also "merely one set good among others" and encourages concern only with "how to live and what to do" (170-171). Goods for Taylor are also always multifarious, but they are not exactly *diverse* in the peculiar sense that Williams wants – that is, goods for Williams must be described in terms beyond philosophy (via history, psychology, and the social sciences). Taylor's goods, on the other hand, though they are theoretically pluralistic as described for example in "The diversity of goods" (230-247), are always described in terms of a distinctly philosophical anthropology that has a great deal of faith in its own efficacy. Williams has less faith in philosophy's abilities and he wants to turn elsewhere to explain importance. Furthermore, as Williams notes in his reply to Taylor, "how to live and what to do" (the first two of Taylor's axes) are all well and good for Taylor but ultimately subordinate to "what it is 'good to love'" (the third axis) (203). Strong evaluation is concerned with discovering what is *worthy* of our commitments, what is worthy of our devotion. Williams' notion of confidence is simply uninterested in that issue, and would therefore be missing something for Taylor.

Williams also makes an avowedly "un-Socratic" (*ELP*, 168) argument that reflection can destroy ethical knowledge. Briefly, the argument goes something like the following. When we step back and think about the thick ethical concepts that we think we possess with certainty, we might become less sure of their truth. What we

are left with then is something less than what we typically think of as knowledge. This is not so bad, however, because "Ethical knowledge, though there is such a thing, is not necessarily the best ethical state. Here we must remember that in the process of losing ethical knowledge, we may gain knowledge of other kinds, about human nature, history, what the world is actually like" (168). Certainty is not necessary in the ethical realm; only confidence is. Seeing beyond philosophical-rational certainty we gain "understanding" in other areas.

Here again Taylor is very far away. His sensibility is downright Platonic in its talk about the need for contemplation and reflection on those external goods that ground our ethical lives. Once we begin to do this, Taylor thinks, we realize that culturally-historically situated goods, which have come down to us through complex traditions, pervade our lives and ground all our qualitative distinctions. Once we see the long genealogy of our concepts, the myriad sources of our selves, we will be profoundly more self-aware of our backgrounds, and we will rest content for that self-awareness.

It is important to remember, in comparing Williams' reflection argument to Taylor's faith in the search for sources, that Taylor is probably not seeking *knowledge* in the sense that Williams is saying gets destroyed by reflection. *Awareness* and *understanding* are what Taylor is looking for in *Sources of the Self* and elsewhere, not knowledge of the justification-truth-belief sort that Williams argues gets destroyed by reflection. So while Williams' argument here isn't exactly in

conflict with Taylor's project, the comparison does bear out the profound difference in their sensibilities and interests.

The difference between the tasks that Williams and Taylor assign to philosophers gets to the heart of their differences on these issues. Williams espouses "a skepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics" (*ELP*, 74). Ethics is a rich domain informed by lots of considerations about human nature, psychology, history, and so on, about which philosophy doesn't necessarily have anything to say. The particularly philosophical emphasis on the good and value is met by Williams with suspicion as either an invention of philosophers or a provincial exaggeration of their intellectual interests. Taylor, on the other hand, has profound quarrels with particular philosophical *traditions* but not with philosophy itself. There is little in Taylor's work about "the limits of philosophy"; if anything, philosophy in the modern period is *too limited* and needs to expand its horizons to encompass the search for our profoundly multifarious sources. This philosophical project identifies value all the way down and argues that we in fact are always attuned to the good, and that the task of philosophy is to make that attunement more sensitive to our self-understanding. Once we see the profoundly different *philosophical sensibilities* of Williams and Taylor, we can more easily understand their complex and subtle disagreements about the issues of the good and values, and we see clearly Taylor's strong role for philosophical justification.

F. Beyond Moralism

Central to the critiques of Williams and Taylor of mainstream moral philosophy is their mutual distaste for what they call *moralism*, a certain narrow and reductionist picture of moral life that skews ethics away from more important and central human concerns. I'll sketch here the mutual affinities of their criticisms of moralism, having to do with the search for criteria and the obsession with obligations and procedural codes, and then I'll contrast their portraits of what lies beyond moralism. I argue that Williams has a minimalist and thin conception of the moral, while Taylor offers a robust, metaphysically loaded account of moral life. I close with a brief comparative look at how their differing accounts of the extra-moralist domain would fare in the realm of political problem solving.

Williams and Taylor both think that moralism involves the creation of impossibly high standards of argumentation and rationality. Both agree with Richard Rorty's argument in "Human rights, rationality, and sentimentality" that moral philosophy is obsessed with "the rather rare figure of the psychopath, the person who has no concern for any human being other than himself. Moral philosophy has systematically neglected the much more common case: the person whose treatment of a rather narrow range of featherless bipeds is morally impeccable, but who remains indifferent to the suffering of those outside this range, the ones he or she thinks of as pseudohumans" (359). Williams strikes a very similar note in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* when he says, "A note of urgency can sometimes be heard, even in otherwise unhurried writers, when they ask for a justification of morality. Unless the ethical life, or (more narrowly) morality, can be

justified by philosophy, we shall be open to relativism, amoralism, and disorder. As they often put it: when an amoralist calls ethical considerations in doubt, and suggests that there is no reason to follow the requirements of morality, *what can we say to him?*" (22). And Taylor, for his part, expresses doubt that the psychopath really exists: "Do we really face people who quite lucidly reject the very principle of the inviolability of human life?" he wonders in "Explanation and practical reason" (35). He concludes that for the most part we do not, and that moral theory's search for rational criteria to answer the person that Rorty calls the psychopath is a fool's errand, the need for which represents a gross misrepresentation of moral thinking and practical reason.

In this consensus on the pathology of arguing with a psychopath, we see several elements of the shared critique of moralism of Taylor and Williams. The first such element is that moral philosophy operates with a highly narrow conception of what morality is. In chapter 10 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, much admired by Taylor as he admits in several passages in his own work (Cf. "A most peculiar institution"), Williams offers a wholesale critique of the morality system, charging it with thinking that obligations and practical reason or necessity are necessarily unique to the moral domain.

Taylor is here in full agreement, criticizing "the identification of morality with a unified code, generated from a single source" ("Perils of moralism," 347). Taylor's critique of what he calls nomolatry, or "code fixation," in moral philosophy is more or less in accordance with Williams' attack on the obligation pathology of

moral theory in *ELP*. As he puts it in *Sources of the Self*, "This drive towards unification, far from being an essential feature of morality, is rather a peculiar feature of modern moral philosophy" that he wants to challenge with a different, richer moral ontology (77), on which more later.

The other major feature of their shared criticisms of moral philosophy has to do with rationality. For Taylor, moralism involves the rejection of ad hominem reason in favor of exclusively apodictic reason ("Explanation and practical reason," 59-60). In seeking a neutral language of pure rationality (or something close to it) with which to describe moral behavior, the moralists ignore strong evaluation and qualitative distinctions, Taylor's terms for moral judgments that inescapably call to us and appear worthy of our devotion and love. Ad hominem reason, on the other hand, explicitly involves appeals to qualitative distinctions and is utterly unconcerned with the "decisive criteria" and strictly foundationalist rationality that the apodictic seeks (44).

Williams sounds quite similar when he criticizes rationality conceived of as the "belief that you can look critically at all your dispositions from the outside, from the point of view of the universe"; in contrast, he makes the more modest claim that "neither the psychology nor the history of ethical reflection gives much reason to believe that the theoretical reasonings of the cool hour can do without a sense of the moral shape of the world, of the kind given in the everyday dispositions" (*ELP*, 110). Just as we require *internal* reasons for action, our reflections cannot rest upon the universal laws of rationality, but rather upon more local cosmologies and forms of

life. Instead of striving towards "the point of view of the universe," ethics should instead aim "to help us to construct a world that will be our world, one in which we have a social, cultural, and personal life" (111). That activity is not theoretical in nature – we don't need ethical theory to achieve those goals of constructing our world. Casting ethical theory aside does not mean that "the only alternative…is to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice. Theory and prejudice are not the only possibilities for an intelligent agent, or for philosophy" (112).

In later work applying the structure of his critique of moral theory to political theory, Williams calls moralism the family of views "that make the moral prior to the political" ("Realism and moralism in political theory," 2). Political thought must be concerned with practical political facts, not with theoretical concerns. There can be no political theory all the way down, no turning of the spade upon the bedrock of a neutral theoretical account of the political (8-9). This picture is echoed in the earlier work in moral philosophy, in which he admits to being a proponent of a "skepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics" (*ELP*, 74). There Williams sought an ethics that looks to domains like the social sciences, history, and psychological dispositions rather than to the kind of exclusively *philosophical* theorizing about obligations, criteria, and rational foundations that he and Taylor are in agreement in thinking to be far from genuine human concerns and behavior.

That kind of diversification of our philosophical concerns would constitute something like the striving for "the human point of view" (118) that Williams says should be the goal of ethics; the human point of view sounds somewhat like Taylor's

ad hominem appeals to the distinctions that matter to us as human beings, in place of the apodictic rationality that Taylor and Williams seem to be in agreement in thinking to be a distortion of our moral thinking.

So the critique of the narrowness of the morality system and of the skewed rationality that supports it is a shared characteristic of Taylor and Williams. Their critiques veer off from one another, of course, when it comes to the issue of naturalism, which Taylor calls one of the primary motivations for this "faulty metaethic" known as moralism that he dislikes as much as Williams does ("Explanation and practical reason," 59). In speaking of qualitative distinctions, strong evaluation, and the third axis of what it is good for me to love, Taylor's views, Williams says, "for me, are too removed from naturalism" ("Replies," 203).

Their differing views on naturalism color their visions of what lies beyond moralism. For Taylor, any conception of the moral *must* incorporate (1) strong evaluations as a fact of human behavior (transcendental human agency); (2) the "vertical dimension" of our moral thinking, incorporating the opening of possibilities whereby "our moral predicament [can be] altered" beyond the mere arbitration between parties/obligations/options ("Perils of moralism," 350, 361); (3) attunement to the good, inescapable frameworks, and the third axis of what it is good for me to love (Cf. *Sources of the Self*, chapters 1 and 2, especially 15, 47, 50).

Beyond these foundations for what moral life looks like, Taylor's project of the retrieval of outmoded ways of thinking in *Sources* and other works leads him to an engagement with Christianity as a guide for our attunement to the good. For

example, in "A Catholic modernity?" he argues that we can escape the dilemmas and frustrations of "exclusive humanism" only by opening ourselves up to God, by seeing ourselves as children made in His image, in order to cement our universalist political sentiments (185-187). On a similar note, in "Perils of moralism," he argues that Christianity frees us from nomolatry because "Christian faith can never be decanted into a fixed code. Because it always places our actions in two dimensions, one of right action, and also an eschatological dimension" (350). The Christian alternative to our secular culture is one Taylor finds strongly attractive, and perhaps, in his estimation, even essential to the spiritual health of our civilization.

This kind for Christian alternatives can be found throughout Taylor's work. In total, Taylor's vision beyond moralism, we can say, involves a rich ontology of moral judgments with the heavy metaphysical baggage of the good, frameworks, loving, and even Christian spirituality. This is a heavy metaphysics.

For Williams, on the other hand, what we find beyond moralism is sketchier and harder to pin down. Starting with the political work, where the term "moralism" is explicitly and disparagingly used, the preferable alternative is what is referred to as *political realism*. While moralism is the prioritizing of "the moral" over "the political," political realism accedes "greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" ("Realism and moralism in political theory," 2-3). In thinking about politics, Williams says we should reject moralism in favor of realism because theory of a

distinctively philosophical sort doesn't do us much good. We should instead restrict ourselves to "the level of fact, practice, and politics" (17).[4]

More or less this same formula is at work in Williams' moral philosophy. Here there are two principal families of considerations that lie beyond moralism: (1) brute psychological facts that descriptively explain our moral behavior, especially *dispositions* and *internal reasons* and (2) an ethics that, in incorporating not only psychology but also history, the social sciences, and the teachings of the ancient Greeks, reaches far beyond the constricting pressures of modern theory.

What I take Williams to be getting at in his rather obscure picture of internal reasons, dispositions, and history is that moral life is extremely complex and difficult to understand, and thus our study of it will reflect that obscurity and difficulty. The whole point of the failings of moralism from William's perspective is that, after you've read Kant and Bentham and Mill, it really isn't that hard to understand; it's a facile and reductionist portrait. Paradoxically, moralism's simplicity is no virtue; given the murkiness of our moral lives, elegant theory is instead a vice.

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[4] Williams disparages Richard Rorty's ironism on, e.g., 13; in his review of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; and most forcefully in *Truth and Truthfulness*. But how is Williams' political realism ultimately that different from Rorty's political pragmatist view in, e.g., "The priority of democracy over philosophy"? Rorty is fond of telling his critics they aren't as different from him as they'd like to think, and in this case he may have had a point.

Ultimately Williams' picture of the alternative to moralism (with the caveat mentioned above about what is not meant by "alternative") is quite naturalist where Taylor's is strongly non-naturalist. While Taylor constantly tells us that strong evaluation is a fact of our behavior, it is "not just…a contingently true psychological fact about human beings" (*Sources*, 27) but a fact of some necessity about our human integrity and character, something higher about us that we have to acknowledge to be true. It is, in other words, a non-naturalist fact, meaning it has no cachet for Williams. Internal reasons for action and psychological dispositions *are* just facts of the naturalist sort.

Williams' *thin naturalist realism* doesn't require the metaphysics of Taylor's *rich moral ontology* of strong evaluations and Christian frameworks. For Williams, Taylor's account is too reminiscent of old metaphysics; for Taylor, Williams' moral thought is too thin and not sufficiently attuned to the goods and frameworks that inextricably govern our moral lives.

Such are the competing visions of Taylor and Williams about how to think beyond moralism. What might an application of their ideas in the political realm look like? Both profess support for international human rights in their work, yet global human rights culture rests upon a picture of *obligations*; makes frequent use of *criteria* to include all persons under the heading of the human; is derived from *liberal political theory*; and is explicitly a *code of conduct*, in the form of international humanitarian law and so on. In other words, the ideology of human rights seems to commit a lot of the sins that Taylor and Williams get worked up about, yet they want to buffer human rights in various ways. Would the principles of international human

rights be better served by Taylor and/or Williams than they are by their current intellectual foundations?

There seems to be problems with both their approaches in this domain. Taylor makes much of the anger and frustration inherent in secular culture at our inability to live up to the ideals of our professed universalist political philosophy. According to him, such anger leads inevitably to violence and is the only possible outcome of the insufficient grounding for universalism present in secularism (Cf. "A Catholic modernity?" and "Perils of moralism" for versions of this argument). Therefore, as we have discussed, Christianity is our alternative.

We can see what he means to a certain extent. Horrific events in the world everyday make a mockery of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it seems as if it is impossible for us humans to live up to our own words. But is Christianity really the answer? Why is Christianity any better suited to provide foundations for the dignity of all persons, when it failed to do so when it was the dominant ideology of our culture? With all the history of repression, violence, and warfare that religion brings along with it, why should we think, with Taylor, that Christianity will frustrate us any less than liberal humanism has done? Did we ever live up to the Bible more than we live up today to the United Nations Charter?

As for Williams, the worry with his approach as an alternative is that it doesn't seem that different from what we are already doing.[5] Williams entreats us to pay attention to "fact, practice, and politics" rather than theory. As an intellectual program, this isn't particularly promising. He admits it is politically "platitudinous" ("Realism and moralism in political theory," 13), but does it represent a genuine contribution to the discourse on human rights? Williams might phrase the question differently, however: do human rights, he would ask, really need a better *foundation*, as Taylor supposes, in the first place? Or do they just need to be better *enforced*, in which case his pragmatic approach might be practically sufficient?

How one answers that question depends in large part on where one's sensibility falls on the spectrum between the metaphysics of Taylor and the psychological realism of Williams. In the latter case, brute enforcement is the issue, while for the former, the issue of foundations remains of the utmost importance. What I want to address next is which is more useful in engagement with cultural and political issues.

G. How Heavy Should the Package of Rights Be?

Nowhere is the distinction between Taylor and Williams on the role of philosophy more apparent than in their discussions of the justification of rights, Williams in "Toleration, a political or moral question?" and Taylor in "Conditions of

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[5] However, an example of a generous attempt to apply some of Williams' ideas to cultural and public debate occurs in Georgia Warnke, *Legitimate Differences: Interpretation in the Abortion Controversy and Other Public Debates*, pp. 159-181. As far as I can tell, though, this was a rare attempt.

an unforced consensus on human rights." Though their subjects are slightly different (toleration versus international human rights), I take the juxtaposition of these two discussions to reveal their contrasting conceptions of the place of, roughly speaking, philosophy in grounding or justifying and interrogating public values. For Williams, moral justification is always subordinate to raw political justification and enforcement (the political analogues of his psychological realism), while for Taylor intellectual "background justifications," which he spends so much of his own work explicating, are sometimes necessary to satisfactorily ground legal norms, especially when forging genuine understandings between cultures. This distinction is one about philosophy's place in what Taylor terms the "whole package" of rights. For Taylor, that package can and sometimes must include philosophy; for Williams, philosophy inevitably weighs down rights and public values.

I'll explicate both their accounts of the role of moral and philosophical reasoning in public discussions of values and rights, and I'll end with the beginning of some thoughts on how to evaluate the merits of their approaches. Williams takes "toleration" as a social value to be his subject. There are four conditions of toleration: (i) that "the agent [must have] some very strong view on a certain matter"; (ii) that the agent sees views that conflict with his own to be truly wrong; nevertheless (iii) that those views should be allowed to be held and expressed publicly; and *furthermore* (iv) that the party with opposing views has the *right* to "not be constrained in the matter of the views he holds and expresses" (130).

So how do we explain such a right? Williams takes there to be two possible accounts: a *moral* explanation and a *political* one. The moral explanation, which has

the moral *autonomy* of persons as the justification of their right to express opposing views and not be constrained for having those views, Williams says is clearly insufficient to ground the tolerant *attitude* needed to justify tolerant policies on two grounds. The first ground is that autonomy is a heavily philosophical concept that cannot itself be foundational: "A belief in autonomy is quite certainly a distinctive moral belief, and one that carries elaborate philosophical considerations along with it" that would make liberalism "'just a sectarian doctrine'" (131).

The second reason why the moral explanation is insufficient is that autonomy makes it difficult to express disapproval of other views and to pressure the parties who hold those views to change their minds *without* (a) violating those parties' autonomy or (b) just refraining from disapproving because that would violate the very attitude of toleration. Autonomy as a concept, Williams argues, provides precisely no grounds to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable ways of influencing other parties: "there is one question of what kinds of influence or social pressure would count as trespassing on the other's autonomy, and there is another question about the forms of expression that will have to be available to agents if they are to count as seriously disapproving of the other's conduct and values to the degree that calls upon the supposed attitude of toleration; and there is simply no reason to believe that the answers to those questions will necessarily coincide" (132).

The political explanation, on the other hand, just says that state power cannot be exercised in certain ways with respect to people's views: "political power

is withheld from enforcing certain outcomes, not because the people affected have a right under the good of autonomy to choose their way of life without undue external influence, but because state power should not used in that kind of purpose" (134). The political explanation, in a sense, is a negative and prohibitive/restrictive condition, whereas the moral appeal to autonomy is a richer and more positive move. Williams argues that "instead of trying to reach the politics of liberalism from a moral assumption that concerns toleration, we should rather consider first the politics of liberalism, including its practices of toleration, and then ask what, if any, kinds of moral assumptions are related to that" (135).

Such an approach will demonstrate that it is "hard to discover any *one* attitude that underlies liberal practices. What [a political investigation suggests] is that, given a liberal state and its typical patterns of legitimation…toleration will be supported by a variety of attitudes," not one single overarching attitude or value such as autonomy (138). A diverse set of attitude supports toleration in fact, Williams argues, and thus the political explanation arrives at "a more skeptical, historically alert, politically direct conception of [liberalism and liberal values] as the best hope for humanly acceptable legitimate government under modern conditions" (138).

This political explanation, which Williams takes to always be a better approach to explaining values like toleration than the moral explanation, is part of Williams' family of naturalist accounts of moral life, similar to his reliance on psychological realism in explaining internal reasons for action and the eschewal of

the morality system in ethics. The question becomes to what extent we are satisfied with such a naturalist politics. For instance, condition (iv) for toleration makes the right to not be constrained a necessary part of the concept – but this move by Williams seems to stack the deck in favor of a political explanation, since the right to not be constrained is always *itself* a political condition, so of course an exclusively *moral* account will be inferior. He similarly stacks the deck with the presupposition of making a liberal *state* a given, making a raw political account the obvious approach within such an assumption. Furthermore, Williams acknowledges in several places but glosses over the fact that the *ideal* of toleration is itself a moral one; he seems to be talking instead just about raw enforcement *of* that ideal, which makes his short-shrifting of the moral all the more unfair given the presumption that the ideal is justified on its own.

Taylor, on the other hand, takes international human rights as his subject, specifically the "whole package" of rights that includes (1) "legal forms by which immunities and liberties are inscribed as rights," (2) "a philosophy of the person and of society, attributing great importance to the individual and making matters turn on his or her power of consent" (108), and (3) all the "background justifications" that include philosophy as well as moral considerations (122-123). The question is to what extent all three components of the package are needed to reach an international consensus on the extension of human rights.

In cases where non-Western societies resist human rights because they have differing versions of (2)-(3), that is, differing philosophies and moral considerations,

then Taylor concedes that there are "potential advantages of distinguishing the elements and loosening the connection between a legal culture of rights enforcement and the philosophical conceptions of human life that originally nourished it" (109). Here Williams would no doubt be in full agreement: the raw question of legal norms is the most important as a pragmatic and political concern, so an explanation of those rights as a way of selling them to other societies (put less crudely, of persuading them to adopt those values) shouldn't include moral-philosophical considerations which will just weigh down the legal norms and make them harder to export.

So up to now, Taylor concedes this point: there can indeed be "a convergence on certain norms from out of very different philosophical and spiritual backgrounds" – *however*, and here comes the inevitable divergence from Williams, that "is not a satisfactory end point. Some attempt at deeper understanding must follow or the gains in agreement will remain fragile" (117). Even the practical-political considerations of implementing legal rights will be made the more difficult without the background justifications being understood by all the parties involved: "The only cure for contempt here is understanding" (117).

So the issue really is when philosophical considerations kick in to support the legal norms. There are instances, again, where the philosophy is not necessary for the legal norms, and that the legal "bare consensus" will just give way eventually to a philosophical "fusion of horizons" (117). However, there are two further worries. One is that the legal norms on their own can be enfeebled without the

background, and that this giving way to a "fusion of horizons" can be painful and violent. The second worry is that there are instances where *even* the legal norms cannot be implemented without background understanding. An example of this second instance is gender rights: "The whole shape of the change that could allow for an unforced consensus on human rights here includes a redefinition of identity, perhaps building on transformed traditional reference points in such a way as to allow for a recognition of an operative equality between the sexes" (119). This philosophical dialogue and interchange would have to occur simultaneously with or before the legal implementation.

An example of the importance of this interchange given by Taylor is that between the Islamic world and the West, wherein we in the West look down upon the Islamic world's failure to implement our level of human rights as merely their failure to make the reduction of suffering a paramount principle. In other words, they have failed to recognize "the negative significance of pain" (121). This leads to total intolerance on our part, Taylor says, because we fail to appreciate the more positive philosophical development in Western culture that led to human rights and the pride of place of the reduction of suffering: the affirmation of ordinary life, a topic familiar to us by now from Taylor's other work.

Without a full appreciation of the complete philosophical background of our values, our ignorance causes us to resent other cultures for their failure to accord with us, Taylor argues: "Only if we in the West can recapture a more adequate view of our own history can we learn to understand better the spiritual ideas that have

been interwoven in our development and hence be prepared to understand sympathetically the spiritual paths of others toward the converging goal" (123). (He offers no analogous account for the reverse case of resentment, by the Islamic world of the West, but presumably it would be a similarly philosophical story.)

So we see how Taylor's account, which makes ample room for philosophical considerations to not only support existing legal norms but also in the forging of a consensus to create legal norms to be implemented in the first place, is a *non-naturalist* one that sees a need for moral considerations, for concerns beyond the raw political, while Williams' purely political and descriptive explanation of toleration is one that sees abstraction and moralizing as always a barrier to political achievement and thus we might say represents a form of *political naturalism*.

Acknowledging of course that Taylor's account, insofar as it fails to be *complete* in the sense of a total historical/social/political/cultural explanation, is one-dimensional, it seems to me that his conception of public discussion of these issues is much more philosophically satisfying than Williams'. For one thing, Williams' account seems to have no resources for discussing dialogue *between cultures* while Taylor's explicitly addresses that increasingly important area of discourse. The toleration that involves rights and constraining as Williams has it is one that can only exist *within* a culture with an established internal legal framework. There are no rights of this sort between disparate societies. Once we start talking about toleration *between* societies (Taylor's example of the West and Islam is instructive), Williams' pure political naturalism that sees room only for discussions

of internal state power will have nothing to say. Discussing issues of great import across cultural boundaries will inevitably require, it seems, recourse to talk of the *values* those cultures hold and appeal to. In that case, Taylor's talk of fusing horizons and moral-philosophical understanding will be much more valuable.

Furthermore, and this may seem an obvious but I think important point to make here, when we are talking about things like toleration, human rights, and the basic legitimacy of the state, we are talking about *values* that have, as Taylor quite rightly sees, philosophical backgrounds. So to say that we have to restrict ourselves to the level of pure *political* explanation seems deeply unsatisfying – and even more damning, especially from Williams' own perspective, deeply *untrue* to the real background of the issues. That is to say, Williams' pure political approach may be *unrealistic*, the greatest sin one can commit in his own system.

Finally, Williams perhaps presents a kind of straw man in saying that a moral explanation must appeal to just one big value as an explanation, as in autonomy for toleration, and that the great virtue of the political is that only it can see a wider variety of attitudinal explanations. Taylor's own genealogical project, in places like *Sources of the Self*, suggests otherwise: that a "moral explanation" can show a rich diversity of explanations for values, a virtue Williams takes to be exclusive to his exclusively political account. One example to the contrary is Taylor's explanation of the Western emphasis on reducing suffering as coming from the affirmation of ordinary life, a concept richly discussed in *Sources* and touched upon here in "Conditions of an unforced consensus."

Williams and Taylor may well be right that the package of human rights will get weighed down by too many philosophical and moral background considerations for it to fly politically with other cultures, but as a philosophical explanation, Taylor's non-naturalism seems to better account for the weight of public political values. To do totally without philosophy, as Williams would have it, seems unfair to the rich, deep background of those values, which comes to us not just from the political realm, but from a wider array of intellectual sources that philosophy would help us to understand. On the level of understanding internal reasons and the deficiency of the morality system, Williams' minimalist naturalism is extremely helpful, but in the realm of cultural dialogue and political discourse, Taylor's richer ontology strikes us as truer to the complexity of the problems.

The salient point of comparing the political applications of their differing philosophical programs is to show the limits of Williams' naturalism and the virtues of Taylor's non-naturalism. We should agree with Taylor that philosophy really can have something to say to us about controversial but fundamental cultural questions and therefore we can follow him in wondering how philosophy can accomplish this task, rather than agreeing with Williams, for whom such a task is largely a waste of time – if indeed we are interested in philosophical investigations of cultural problems.

H. What's At Stake in the Naturalism/Non-Naturalism Debate?

The criticisms lodged against the morality system by Williams and Taylor are far-reaching. Their searing indictment of modern moral philosophy as obsessed with obligations, necessity, and procedures applies to a wide range of styles of ethical thought, from Kantianism to utilitarianism to contractualism to discourse ethics. Yet neither wants to abandon moral philosophy as such, as Richard Rorty implores us to do by replacing metaethics with a project of "practical problem-solving" ("Human rights, rationality, and sentimentality," 355). Williams[6] and Taylor are decidedly not eliminativists about ethics as such. Instead they can be interpreted as avatars of *naturalism* and *non-naturalism* about ethics, respectively, which they take to represent genuine alternatives to the approaches they criticize. What's at stake in the debate between these two approaches? In closing Part I, I want to argue that both paradigms represent significant advances over the consensus against which they both argue in terms of saying something interesting and relevant about human moral life, but that the choice between the two as alternatives to "mainstream" moral theory presents starkly differing conceptions of the role of *philosophical justification* in public and moral life. I'll close by plumping for non-

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[6] A question that may have occurred to readers sympathetic to naturalism, or a question that surely will occur to such readers by the time I render my verdict on naturalism as compared with non-naturalism, is whether Williams, an idiosyncratic, hard to pin down, and ultimately rather *anti-philosophical* philosopher, is the best representative of that tradition. I chose him because of his unique position in conversation with Taylor and because of his particularly trenchant critique of the morality system. I also think his psychological realism is representative of naturalistic strategies. Dewey, e.g., is much more willing to have philosophy play a role in the public sphere – more so than any other naturalist, surely. But as we'll see in Part II, I find fault with his strategies too, so naturalism, though I continue to disagree with it, is, I think, fairly well represented in this project.

naturalism, which has a strong role for philosophical justification, as a starting point for developing a fundamental ethics in Part II.

Once again, for both the naturalist and the non-naturalist, the morality system is a narrow and formalist reduction of the complexity of human moral life. In formulating absolute rules (the categorical imperative), or holding one value as higher than all others (utility), or insisting that what is right and wrong follows from a rigid conception of rationality (the original position), the proponents of the morality system have invented, the naturalist and non-naturalist agree, a conception of moral life that cannot help but strike us as untrue and inaccurate. We need something with which to replace the morality system.

Against the moralist strategy, the naturalist and the non-naturalist see themselves as making appeals to *facts* about humans rather than abstractions about morality such as those referred to above. For the naturalist, of course, these are facts of a raw sort, primarily about human psychology and behavior that will account for the way we make decisions and formulate justifications. Thus we will arrive at a minimalist but fundamentally true picture of the ethical; ethics is stripped of its heavy philosophical baggage, becoming a sleeker animal that references not only psychology but also the social sciences and history – it will describe the ethical in terms of the non-ethical, in Williams' formulation. This is an ethics of a distinctly non-philosophical kind, without the abstraction and reductionism of philosophical ethics that has plagued that domain, according to the naturalist, at least since Kant.

There is thus for the naturalist no independent philosophical standpoint on which to rely. The facts alone, instead, will speak for themselves.

The non-naturalist thinks that psychology alone is seriously insufficient. Here there are still appeals to facts about human behavior, but these facts are more robustly philosophical, not just contingently true. They include such observations as that we cannot help but feel moved by ideals, for instance, or that we always appeal to thick concepts like the good and the just in justifying our actions. Understanding and explaining these facts for the non-naturalist requires a philosophical anthropology that gives us a rich and full portrait of our intellectual backgrounds and histories. Only in creating such a genealogy and retrieving the goods and ideals that have grounded and upheld our ways of being and to which we attune ourselves will we truly understand the way we act now; only then can we feel that the way we do things is really justified and right. Without the background understanding, we will feel lost and hopeless, the non-naturalist says.

Reviewing the contrast between these alternatives to the morality system begs the question of what really matters about the dispute between the two competing approaches. They both seek to give an explanatory account of moral life without recourse to the strategies of the morality system by using facts about and descriptions of human behavior. It is the role of *philosophy* and *philosophical justification* that really marks the difference between the two. Put simply, for the naturalist philosophical justification doesn't matter very much; for the non-naturalist it is decisively important.

Since the naturalist has no recourse to independent philosophical justifications for practices, he must appeal to the practices themselves to arrive at an explanatory account. Thus we get the strong reliance on psychological fact in the naturalist picture, as well as the appeal to descriptive strategies like history. The naturalist thinks that the existence of practices is enough to justify them – insofar as *justification* means understanding why we carry out the practices we do in the first place. Naturalist justification is devoid of *normative content*. There is no apparent ethical reason for why one behavioral practice is superior to another. The absence of normative content explains the *anti-philosophical* character of the naturalist explanatory account – the skepticism that is about philosophy but not about ethics itself that Williams articulates in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

The naturalist is insistent that practices motivate us because they have psychological cachet for us. Philosophy, though, tends to muddle our understanding of how motivation really works. The abstractions and psychological misunderstandings that it offers will only lead us astray; motivation comes from the practices themselves, which are justified by their psychological/factual import. The fact of practical engagement is motivation enough when it is unimpeded by philosophy.

Justification and motivation work rather differently for the non-naturalist. Justification requires *understanding* the complex web of the intellectual backgrounds of our practices. We must engage in a philosophical anthropology that gives the full map of our ways of being. The goods and ideals that are revealed by

this anthropological project provides the full justification of our current practices; without these goods and the justification they provide, the intellectual infrastructure of those practices collapse and we will not be able to wholeheartedly engage in those practices. The non-naturalist thinks there are dire practical consequences of this breakdown.

The non-naturalist might concede to the naturalist that intellectual backgrounds do not themselves motivate us to engage in certain practices, but the non-naturalist is nevertheless insistent that genuine justification requires a deep appreciation of those backgrounds, whereas the naturalist is hostile to these philosophical investigations. The non-naturalist account of motivation is murky in that it is unclear to what extent the backgrounds (that comprise the justificatory account) play a role in practical motivation. Nevertheless, it is clear that motivation requires the philosophical justificatory account in some fashion, and thus the contrast with the naturalist is clear enough.

So how might we arbitrate between the two approaches now that we appreciate what the difference comes down to? I'll raise two objections to each approach to get to the heart of the matter. Against naturalism, there is the problem of *arbitrariness*. Without some independent or external justification beyond the practices themselves, how do we appreciate changes in attitude? When practices change over time or across distance, the naturalist has little to say about how to explain those differences and changes beyond a descriptive account of the practical changes themselves and perhaps a psychological explanation of the shift. The

naturalist is explicit about the absence of these tools in his explanation, but seems to think it doesn't represent a genuine problem.

Nevertheless, this *normative deficiency* can't help but strike us as a problem when we are talking about moral practices that do carry normative weight in our lives. The naturalist has no appreciation of *the truth* of ethical practices beyond the factual, no way of saying "This is a better way of doing things" or "This was the moral problem with that past practice." Instead there is just description and facts. What the naturalist lacks, in short, and what we think we need when discussing such weighty issues, is an account of the genuine improvement or the decline of moral practices. Naturalist explanations strike us as arbitrary and suffering from a normative deficiency of explanation.

The non-naturalist account has problems of its own, however. The first we can term the *importance* problem. Against the non-naturalist insistence that philosophical justification and backgrounds are really important, a skeptic can always raise the question of to what extent this is really true. In going about our lives and making practical decisions about what is right and true, to what extent are grand intellectual narratives really playing a role? The non-naturalist has to say that they are playing *some* role, but the murkiness of that account is indicative of the extent to which this is a difficult thing to explain and to understand. We do not know what it would mean to say that the backdrop of Western intellectual history is really important for our everyday decisions (if this is in fact what the non-naturalist suggests). We might concede that this story is important in our development and

education, perhaps, but in terms of practical motivation it may seem a hard pill to swallow.

A second problem for the non-naturalist we might term an *intelligibility* objection. One virtue of the naturalist strategy is that it seems pretty clear what a psychological and historical explanatory account looks like. The non-naturalist, on the other hand, has a much more complex story – we need, he says, a philosophical anthropology involving what Taylor calls the "fusion of horizons" that gives a full portrait of these intellectual and philosophical backgrounds. The intelligibility objection asks what these horizons consist in, exactly. What kind of stories do these horizons involve, and what role do they play in motivating us? These are questions about the non-naturalist account that have no obvious answer (at least, not one so obvious as, e.g., what a psychological account consists in) and that raises serious problems about the practical efficacy of the strategy.

So against the objections to naturalism, the non-naturalist can say that his backgrounds strategy has no *arbitrariness* problem – we can account for progress by looking at the complex genealogy that the examination of where progress comes from offers us. The non-naturalist anthropological project of retrieval cannot help but be *normative* and therefore has no arbitrariness problem or normative/truth deficiency problem.

On the other hand, the naturalist can say that his account fully acknowledges the relative *unimportance* of philosophy (though this is as we shall see a particular prejudice of his); indeed, he relies on that alleged fact by privileging the factual and

the practical. Furthermore, his minimalist picture suffers from none of the *intelligibility* problems of the non-naturalist horizons strategy. (Indeed, his picture might be a bit too simple in this respect.)

Given the genuine problems with both the naturalist and non-naturalist approaches, it is no easy task to arbitrate between the two as alternatives to moralism. Which one we decide to accept probably will have to do with the extent to which we are willing to put philosophy on a high pedestal in our justificatory account of moral and cultural practices. While the naturalist account has its efficacy and elegance going for it, it nevertheless seems unfair to the inherently philosophical character of moral examination to extricate it from our account so fully. Perhaps the non-naturalist problems simply have to be accepted, and hopefully minimized, to be able to integrate philosophy into our self-understanding to a satisfactory extent. Furthermore, if we seek a fundamental ethics, as I will seek to do in Part II, philosophy will have to play an important role in such a project, and so the importance problem of non-naturalism isn't at all compelling for our purposes.

As we saw in our discussion of political naturalism as well as non-naturalist contributions to political and cultural dialogues (our examples from Williams and Taylor were tolerance and international human rights in chapter I G), it seems that non-naturalism, where philosophical justification is given a prominent role in explaining goods and backgrounds, is better equipped to deal with questions in the public sphere. Naturalism's response to political questions, preferring to stick to

facts and description, struck us as philosophically unsatisfactory, while the non-naturalist at least had something more robust to say to such issues. *If* we think ethics should have a voice in such conversations (which is no sure thing, of course, but a preference we should be upfront about), and *if* we think that ethics can add something to our self-understanding in a philosophically robust way, as fundamental ethics says it is capable of doing, then we should plump for non-naturalism as a conversation starter. In Part II, where we will discuss what a fundamental ethics can say about the cultural issues of nihilism and secular humanism, we will take non-naturalism as the starting point of the discussion, without actually endorsing its philosophical conclusions.

Part II: Away from the Transcendent

"Philosophy has often seen itself as a way of transcending the merely human, of giving the human being a new and more godlike set of activities and attachments. The alternative I explore here sees it as a way of being human and speaking humanly. That suggestion will appeal only to those who actually want to be human, who see in human life as it is, with its surprises and connections, its pains and sudden joys, a story worth embracing. This in no way means not wishing to make life better than it is. But...there are ways of transcending that are human and 'internal,' and other ways that involve flight and repudiation." –
Martha Nussbaum

A. The Non-Naturalist Definition of Nihilism

At the end of Part I, in chapter I H, we saw that the really salient distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism amounts to the importance of philosophical justification and motivation in moral and public life, with non-naturalism having a significantly more prominent role for philosophical engagement, making it a better conversation starter on philosophical issues of cultural import than naturalism, which tends to downgrade the role of philosophical ethics in favor of other domains. Starting now in Part II, we will be examining how the non-naturalist strategy might go about approaching an important phenomenon of modern culture about which philosophy might have something to say: the specter of *nihilism* (which we will soon define). What can non-naturalism say about that problem? In the coming chapters, I'll conclude that non-naturalism neither satisfactorily defines nor responds to nihilism, and that a *fundamental ethics* for our culture would respond to nihilism in a different and better way that I'll try to articulate. What follows here is an introduction to the non-naturalist definition of nihilism and their proposed response to it.

Non-naturalism, which wants to make substantial room for non-natural qualities like the good and other ideals as well as the psychological processes by which humans align themselves with such ideals in our ethical behavior, defines nihilism as a problem about the *denial of transcendence* in the value system of a culture. All the ideals about which non-naturalism wants to talk have to be by their nature transcendent ones, metaphysical entities that exist beyond the physical world that naturalism takes as philosophy's exclusive provenance. These non-natural qualities are essential to the health of one's moral life, and when a culture denies us access to those entities, in ways we'll review below, then it becomes a nihilistic culture because it is one cut off from the transcendent sacred things. So non-naturalists have to come up with ways of getting us back in touch with the transcendent sacred, such as a polytheistic appreciation of sacred things or by religious correctives to strong forms of secular humanism, in order to rid us of the specter of nihilism.

To a significant extent, then, the non-naturalist has to say that any view that denies transcendence actually implies nihilism. A narrative could be written in which *naturalism*, for example, was actually a heralding cry for nihilism. Such a narrative would go something like the following. After the "death" of God, and with the advancements in modern natural science (the Galilean-Copernican Revolution, Darwinism, and others), a strong trend in ethics began to look toward just natural phenomena to explain our sense of right and wrong as a way of breaking from the religious past. Instead of looking to metaphysical or otherwise mysterious sources of values like God or reason or horizons or progress, naturalism grew in influence in

ethics precisely because it seemed more realistic, more scientific, more modern in tenor. "Naturalism" in this narrative encompasses a lot of different traditions in moral philosophy in the past few centuries, from Nietzsche to pragmatism. It is a byword for traditions that reject non-naturalism in all its forms by rejecting transcendence as the horizon of value and worth in human life.

So instead of accounting for value by looking to something *beyond*, the naturalist looks to, for example, human behavior, psychology, and history to explain how it is that we make decisions and arrive at values. From this picture of human behavior as eminently explainable on its own terms, in defining the ethical in terms of the non-ethical in Williams' formulation, it is not difficult to see how the next logical step is a belief in the ability of humans, possessed of such a complex and powerful psychology, to actually *create* values for themselves. This is roughly the picture Nietzsche and his followers came up with in response to the decay and moral authoritarianism of religion, and it is also the view, in a different form, of projectivists who say that humans impose values on a neutral universe.

And thus, a non-naturalist would say, this naturalist strategy of explaining human moral behavior in purely natural terms implies nihilism, for that is precisely what the creation of values and the denial of transcendence necessarily entail. While Williams, who exemplifies many of these sentiments, has little of the existentialist flavor of Nietzsche and others, he is explicitly working in a Nietzschean vein (Cf. Williams, "Nietzsche's minimalist moral psychology"), and it would not be difficult for a non-naturalist to accuse Williams' naturalism, idiosyncratic though it is, of

falling victim to or implying nihilism in his refusal to talk about non-natural goods (Cf. his "Replies" to Taylor). Against somebody like Williams, a non-naturalist, like Taylor, comes along and points out that we have lost something important when we ignore or downgrade the backgrounds of our values and insist, in whatever fashion, that we can create them ourselves. Nihilism, the non-naturalist says, and this is the point here, comes from the denial of transcendence.

Part II will consist, then, of an examination of this definition of nihilism, followed by my Nietzschean objections to (1) the definition of nihilism as the denial of transcendence, and (2) secular humanism and other such compromised ideologies as plausible correctives to nihilism. Against the non-naturalists, I'll argue that nihilism really derives from the obsession *with* transcendence, not its denial, and I'll advocate for a more radical *break* with religious attitudes as a way to live a joyful life. I'll conclude Part II, and the thesis, with a vision of being-in-the-world that says yes to life and embraces the world joyfully while making room for our attempts to create a better life within it.

So, more specifically, when they say that contemporary culture suffers from the threat of nihilism, what is it that the non-naturalists mean? The central claim in such arguments that we in the West now live in a nihilistic age is that we have somehow lost touch with the *sacred* elements of the world and of human experience that animated the lives of our ancestors, elevating their vision of life beyond the visible world toward some sort of higher realm. Lacking that worldview, the arguments go, we have relegated our visions to a shallower, narrower, this-worldly

conception of the way things are. Without contact with the sacred, we are lost, without a guiding light for our values, aspirations, and desires. A post-sacred worldview is *normatively insufficient*. When we lost contact with the sacred, we became nihilists. Some version of this account is more or less agreed upon by both Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, who view the break with the sacred as a net loss for Western civilization. (Taylor is slightly more ambiguous on this point, often speaking of simultaneous "gains and losses" in such cultural shifts, while Dreyfus and Kelly seem to see the issue in more black-and-white terms.)

That there is such a nihilism problem is a major component of the argument of Dreyfus and Kelly's recent book *All Things Shining*, where they explicitly take Taylor to be one of their intellectual touchstones (20-21). Dreyfus and Kelly argue that in the contemporary West we are cut off from the horizons of values that have guided earlier, more religious epochs (Taylor's influence is obvious enough there), and consequently we suffer from a "burden of choice" that "is unique to contemporary life" (13): "It is not just that we know the course of right action and fail to pursue it; we often seem not to have any sense for what the standards of living a good life are in the first place. Or said another way, we seem to have no ground for choosing one course of action over any other" (15).

But even more than our loss of faith and our disconnectedness from external, transcendent sources of value such as God and the sacred, Dreyfus and Kelly identify another characteristic of the modern age that marks us as truly nihilistic. This is the tendency on our part to believe that "the choice to experience the world as sacred

and meaningful – to do so by dint of effort and will – is a choice that is within our power to make. It is a choice that takes strength and persistence, of course; perhaps it takes even a kind of heroism. But it is possible" (40). Contrary to this view, Dreyfus and Kelly argue that this "entire of mode of existence…far from being the saving possibility of our culture, is in fact a human impossibility" (42). We force ourselves, in other words, believing ourselves far beyond the grip of the horizons of grounded values, to think that we can create our own values. Faced with this impossible task, Dreyfus and Kelly argue, we buckle, fail, and fall into despair, which we see evidenced in the loneliness, anxiety, and meaninglessness that they document in modern life.

To illustrate this contrast between external attunement versus the creation of value *ex nihilo*, consider Taylor's strong evaluations, obviously a source of influence in *All Things Shining* (on my reading at least). Unlike, say Nietzsche, for whom the will to power is just an internal psychological process (remember Williams' emphasis on our psychological dispositions, as well as his Nietzschean affinities, for the connection with naturalism here!), for Taylor, strong evaluations, while they are indeed psychologically salient, really amount to the attunement of our personal value judgments to *external* standards and backgrounds – what Taylor alternately calls "imports" ("Self-interpreting animals," 51) or "hypergoods" (*Sources*, 63-73), which have an existence independent of our desires and will. Dreyfus and Kelly seem to share some version of this story in their argument for a kind of modern *polytheism*, for an appreciation of the sacred and the divine in everyday life by which to attune our own choices and desires. Dreyfus and Kelly's

polytheism, then, like Taylor's strong evaluations, is a profound manifestation of non-naturalism.

So against the nihilism that follows from our isolation from external standards and backgrounds of values, Taylor and Dreyfus and Kelly marshal forth various non-naturalist strategies by which we can ground our values in ways that eliminate anxiety, cement confidence, and provide genuine comfort in a secular age – all by attuning ourselves to the transcendent. So the non-naturalist strategy for combating nihilism is itself an important area of inquiry here. For example, how successful is this proposed strategy? Does non-naturalism offer a genuine corrective to contemporary nihilism? How would strong evaluations and/or modern polytheism really help us to live more meaningful lives? These are questions well worth asking in a nihilistic age, which a non-naturalist sees as distinctively damaging and threatening precisely because we are cut off from the transcendent values that the non-naturalist sees as so crucial to living a meaningful life.

Taylor's response to the problem of nihilism will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapters (and we have already seen aspects of it in our previous examinations of his arguments against exclusive humanism in Part I), but for now let's deal with the rather less complex non-naturalist response to nihilism proposed by Dreyfus and Kelly, whose proposed polytheism constitutes their response to the loss of connection to transcendence as a way to "reanimate" the world.

By polytheism, Dreyfus and Kelly do not mean believing in fairies or the Olympian gods; instead they mean that we should look to the *spirit of transcendent*

feelings that the Homeric Greeks possessed: "the Greeks felt that excellence in a life requires highlighting a central fact of existence: wonderful things outside your control are constantly happening to you. That background of human existence is what justified and reinforced the feeling of gratitude that was so central to the Homeric understanding of what is admirable in a life" (*All Things Shining*, 71). We must reject the projectivist, radically atomistic tendencies of the secular age in which the autonomy of the mind is the distinguishing characteristic of the human: "The modern view that we are entirely responsible for our existence stands in radical contrast with the Homeric idea that we act at our best when we open ourselves to the world, allowing ourselves to be drawn from without" (79). Polytheism means embodying gratitude for the forces at work in the world that guide us and unite us, in contrast to the more atomistic strands of our contemporary culture (82-83). In short, polytheism amounts to the belief that "a central form of human excellence must be drawn from without" (84). To appreciate those outside sources of excellence is to be a modern polytheist.

Polytheism is, naturally enough, for Dreyfus and Kelly crucially *pluralistic*. They argue elsewhere that "neither mono-religion nor mono-reason can be saved" and that thus we must "cultivate the practices of opening ourselves to being overwhelmed by the power of moods and nature," arriving at "a plurality of normative guidelines" ("Saving the sacred from the Axial Revolution," 197).

Polytheism, with its embrace of "different, and sometimes incompatible, situations" (ibid) *within the world* to which we must open ourselves and be grateful

stands in marked and deliberate contrast to totalizing or what Dreyfus and Kelly refer to as "mono-" forms of religion (which insist on looking beyond this world and which write more unified narratives about one God, one set of codes, etc.), as well as secular reason (which, while it also looks just to this world, sees it as first of all devoid of meaning).

It is on this point that Taylor starts to demur. As Iain Thomson notes in a discussion of Taylor, Taylor, though he is, like Dreyfus and Kelly, strongly in favor of *theoretical pluralism* (which we saw very much in evidence in our discussions of his views on moral philosophy, where he is anti-nomolatry, committed instead to a "diversity of goods": Cf. Taylor, "The diversity of goods," pp. 230-247), he "seems not to want to take the further step of suggesting that the reason we cannot exhaustively codify our reality has to do not only with the limits of codification but also with the nature of this reality itself" (143). He is instead an *ontological monist*, committed to the idea that "the meaning of reality is ultimately unified" (ibid). Much of his faith in this unity, this ontological monism, must have something to do with his robust (albeit rather sketchy: Cf. Thomson 151-152) monotheism. (This issue and Taylor's response to nihilism in general will be dealt with, again, in chapter II B.)

Here the contrast between Taylor's non-naturalism and Dreyfus and Kelly's starts to crystallize, as Taylor himself makes clear in his critical discussion of their proposals. There Taylor says that, though he is in full support of their diagnosis of the nihilistic age, his differences with this modern polytheism have to do with its

oppositional definition of monotheism, which amounts to an argument that monotheism "wrongly suppresses or blanks out perfectly valid interstitial meanings" ("Recovering the sacred," 124). Fair enough, he seems to say in response to that definition, but still "we need a better account of when and why this exclusion takes place; and this we don't have yet" (ibid), and thus he is reluctant to write off monotheism entirely (indeed, he embraces it), a move he thinks would be premature and perhaps prejudicial.

Though this odd way Taylor has of making his point may seem like merely the protestation of a man of faith (which indeed is exactly how it at first sounded to me) that we can't be *quite* sure yet that monotheism really is useless and so on, this point really does amount to his crucial difference with the Dreyfus and Kelly model. Taylor simply wants to say that "I still have an important place for the anchored" aspects of the transcendent that monotheism represents (119). The issue now is to wonder *what role monotheism plays in Taylor's non-naturalism*, of which strong evaluations, as we have seen time and time again, play a crucial part as well. As he says here, in a by-now familiar formulation, "We require an ontology with the depth to allow there to be real differences in motivation…A mechanistic account can't make room for this. The whole difference must be one in how people feel" (117).

Polytheism does not accomplish, according to Taylor, what strong evaluation is able to do on its own. Unspoken here might be Taylor's discomfort, as indeed numerous commentators have expressed, with the shallowness and superficiality of Dreyfus and Kelly's prescriptions in chapter 7 of *All Things Shining* for how to live a

polytheist life. They mention learning to appreciate the rituals of drinking coffee and watching sports as a community as ways of getting in touch with the sacred. All very well and good, but all this seems to be an example of, rather than a way of overcoming, the very listlessness and lack of meaning that our nihilistic age is said to represent. So there doesn't seem to be much in the way of a meaningful upshot to actually living with what they call polytheism. Later I will bring up deeper, more profound worries about Dreyfus and Kelly's need for transcendence in their proposals – a need that Taylor also strongly shares.

So we will interrogate the extent to which the non-naturalist anti-nihilist strategies are effective, as well as the very definition of nihilism according to the non-naturalist. Nietzsche, for example, didn't think of nihilism (crucially, nihilism roughly as Dreyfus and Kelly define it, that is: as the willful creation of values *ex nihilo*, as the cutting off of value from transcendence) as such a bad thing. It is, for him, instead a triumph of the human spirit to create values and to say yes to life as it is without recourse to the transcendent. I will draw extensively on these Nietzschean arguments.

So a set of questions here has to do with the extent to which the charge of nihilism can fairly be laid at the door of views that deny transcendence. Is the connection between such views and nihilism a legitimate one with which to criticize the anti-transcendent strategy, or is what Dreyfus and Kelly think of as nihilism really something more positive for the human spirit? Is "nihilism" just a necessary evolutionary stage after the age of faith? In short, are we better off without

transcendence, or are the non-naturalist critics right to suspect that without transcendence we've somehow become impoverished?

To review, we are addressing the assumption that nihilism, or the lack of attunement to outside sources of values and the implication that we must create values ourselves, is potentially a major problem for our culture. A number of questions follow from this proposed definition. First is if that definition of nihilism is true. Second is if non-naturalist strategies of combating nihilism are effective. (We have already questioned the efficacy of the polytheistic alternative.) And finally the question arises: if that claim about what nihilism is turns out to be false, how can nihilism in fact be avoided? If nihilism is indeed a problem for our culture, what is at stake here is the extent to which moral philosophy itself is capable of responding to such a problem or cultural illness. By probing the problem of nihilism from this angle, we are interrogating the efficacy of ethics in contemporary culture in response to a problem like nihilism.

B. What's Right and Wrong with Monotheism?

A main question facing us now as we evaluate Taylor's non-naturalist program is figuring out what role his commitment to Christian monotheism plays in that program. The most salient point to be gleaned from his writings on modernity is that he argues that secularism is insufficiently grounded to support its ultimate ends of equality and universal justice, and that *something is missing* in modern secularism that monotheist transcendence can still offer us. What does Taylor mean

when he says that Christian monotheism fills a gap that secularism is unable to fill? What is wrong with secularism, according to Taylor, and what is thus right about monotheism? The larger objective of this query is to understand the non-naturalist move of appealing to a *something more* that naturalism and formalisms supposedly don't account for – to understand, in other words, Taylor's response to the problem of nihilism. In chapter II A, we saw that nihilism for a non-naturalist like Taylor is equivalent to the denial of transcendence, and his arguments on behalf of his monotheistic commitments constitute Taylor's response to that problem. After looking at Taylor's arguments about monotheism and secularism, especially the relationship between the practical and metaphysical primacies of life, I'll conclude by asking to what extent Taylor's refusal to go on without reference to "something more" constitutes an "otherworldly" nihilist outlook, and I ultimately conclude that it does. I call this my first Nietzschean objection.

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor articulates a picture of our moral behavior as existing along "three axes": (1) what we ought to do (obligations to others); (2) what we ought to be (virtues); and (3) what we ought to love (goods) (15). (3) is what distinguishes Taylor's particular non-naturalist ethics; it represents "the nature of the good that I orient myself by and…the way I am placed in relation to it" (50). The good for Taylor is that with which I desire to be in contact (47). This is a fundamental feature of the human: the axes are "constitutive of human agency…stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood" (27; Cf. also Taylor, "What is human agency?"). But these features of human agency are

no mere "facts" of the sort naturalists make appeals to (think of Williams'

psychological "dispositions"): strong evaluation, he reminds us, is "not just…a

contingently true psychological fact about human beings" (27), but something

deeper we have to acknowledge about ourselves and the way we are.

So Taylor's non-naturalist description of human ethical behavior, which

relies on the theoretical pluralism Thomson identified in Taylor's program, doesn't

itself require monotheism. The three axes and strong evaluation *necessarily* operate

on the human level, so monotheism doesn't kick in at this point.[7] It is rather at the

level of Taylor's *diagnosis of modernity* that that the need for monotheism, Taylor's

ontological monism according to Thomson's formulation, is made apparent. At the

end of *Sources*, Taylor says that "adopting a stripped-down secular outlook, without

any religious or radical hope in history, is not a way of *avoiding* the dilemma" of the

fact that "the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the most

crushing burden on mankind" (more on this later), but instead "involves stifling the

response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that

humans have conceived. This, too, is a heavy price to pay" (519-520).

In contrast to this stifling, this "dilemma of mutilation" that secularism

ultimately amounts to, Taylor professes fealty to "a large element of hope. It is a

hope that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism…and in its central promise of a

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[7] However, an absolutely crucial point to remember here is that Taylor's view of human agency does require *external sources of value* to which we attune ourselves; the transcendental aspect of his view of human agency (Cf. chapter I A) doesn't require monotheism per se, but it most certainly does require transcendence. For Taylor the human level of description includes the transcendent. The good by which I orient myself has to be an external one, in some sense at least.

divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided"
(521). Monotheism therefore represents here the missing piece, the missing
"something more," to which we must aspire; in grounding the extremely high
standards of modernity (equal rights, democratic justice, Kantian principles of
universality, etc.) in purely "rational," naturalistic terms, "we are…living beyond our
moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence"
(517). In contrast, "a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater" (518) in
accomplishing this affirmation. Even though the standards of the religious
perspective are high and "crushing," they are philosophically better supported by a
metaphysical faith in the transcendent, which deepens the sense of the obligations
and softens the sense of self-sacrifice in a way that the practical affirmation of
ordinary life cannot on its own.

His argument follows along similar lines in the essay "A Catholic modernity?"
There he argues that the onset of secularism and the break with total Christian
dominance of Western culture actually resulted in the practical realization of
Christian ideals of equality and benevolence (170). However, he worries that these
ideals are insufficiently grounded by what he calls "exclusive humanism" or "the
view that human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether" (172),
and this attitude is in turn cemented by the affirmation of ordinary life (which he
had developed in *Sources*) (174-175). The *practical* primacy of ordinary life results
in the quest for the improvement of material conditions for as many persons as
possible, which is good for the ideals of benevolence that Western culture holds; but
a second, *metaphysical* affirmation of ordinary life, which denies or downgrades the

striving for the transcendent, ends up leaving those laudable material goals philosophically unsupported or under-supported (176-177).

This is the central conflict of secular modernity, according to Taylor – finding a way to carry out the practical affirmation of ordinary life by improving people's lives, while denying exclusive humanism's metaphysical affirmation (which is essentially a *philosophical position* or *worldview*), thereby opening ourselves up to transcendence once again. The dilemma "can put in danger the most valuable gains of modernity, here the primacy of rights and the affirmation of life" (181). Our insufficiently grounded quest for the affirmation of life results in feelings of shame and frustration that we have failed to realize the highest heights of our ideals, that we have somehow fallen short, and our benevolence "can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression" (183). Many of the horrors of modern history can be ascribed to this dialectic, Taylor thinks (184).

He argues that the key to resolving this dilemma of secular modernity lies somewhere in religion: "it is clear that Christian spirituality points to one [way out of the dilemma]. It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional – that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself – or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God. They obviously amount to the same thing" (185). The Christian doctrine of unconditional love is not dependent on any isolated human characteristic or code of conduct as humanism has it (we are rational beings, we have certain cultural ideals that we must uphold), but is instead based on God's love, which cannot be so

reduced. This whole way of thinking offers a much more robust grounding for the practical affirmation of ordinary life because it "addresses the fragility of what all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, most value in these times" (186) – fragile in the sense that it is dependent on God, not on necessary human characteristics or the certainty of the strength of our own will (this is similar to the arguments in chapters 1 and 2 of Dreyfus and Kelly's *All Things Shining*), and even though Christian spirituality is fragile in that sense, it is in fact much stronger than brittle humanism in the *foundational* sense. Christianity offers, in total, a way of affirming the positive realizations of modernity while "[trying] to make clearer to ourselves and others the tremendous dangers that arise in them" (187).

Thus, while Taylor's non-naturalist account of human behavior (strong evaluation, the three axes) can do without any monotheistic commitments, at the level of supporting modernity's ideals of benevolence and equality, the practical realization of such ideals requires grounding that makes room for transcendence, and Christian monotheism is one such method of grounding – indeed, the only such method that Taylor mentions as powerful enough to do the job. As a good non-naturalist, Taylor is deeply worried about any worldview (exclusive humanism, naturalism) that is dismissive of "something more," something beyond life, something transcendent. Without such yearnings, we will fail in practically affirming the primacy of ordinary life – the improvement of material conditions will be sidetracked by the deep anxieties and worries on the part of those who should be carrying out those tasks; we will be distracted by such religious/philosophical

anxieties, in other words. The stakes here are thus incredibly high, and the role of Christian monotheism is central for Taylor to resolving the dilemmas of modernity.

Earlier, in chapter I C, I took on Taylor's arguments on this issue and concluded that Christianity doesn't always look as good an alternative as he makes it out to be. In fact, the "terrible consequences" of exclusive humanism (violence, frustration, slipping into authoritarianism) that he warns about have historically followed time and time again from Christianity and other religious forms of life, and I therefore suggested that perhaps we can just continue to make do with the world of secular justifications without the thorny and messy Christian alternative. Historically the prospects for Christian inspiration against nihilism does not seem very bright, and indeed such a strategy might even strike us as rather anachronistic in our secular age.

Another line of attack against Taylor here has to do with the efficacy of philosophy itself, an example of which we have seen with Williams' profound skepticism about philosophy in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Another, pragmatist response to Taylor's championing of the primacy of philosophy can be found in Richard Rorty, who says that "the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits isn't working anymore. It isn't doing its job. It has become as transparent a device as the postulation of deities who turn out, by a happy coincidence, to have chosen *us* as their people" ("Solidarity or objectivity?", 238; Cf. also "The priority of democracy to philosophy," pp. 239-258, for a supporting account of philosophy's low place in the totem pole of justificatory

importance). The contrast with Taylor could not, of course, be any greater, but it seems that the dispute between a pragmatist like Rorty and a Christian like Taylor cannot be adjudicated except as a difference in outlook and, in many ways, in optimism.

But here I want to look at Taylor's arguments on a different, deeper level, and interrogate to what extent his "otherworldly" yearning for transcendent grounding is in fact *a nihilistic one*.[8] As we saw with our discussion of Dreyfus and Kelly's book, and as we see again with Taylor's discussion of exclusive humanism in "A Catholic modernity?", a non-naturalist has to say that exclusive attention to this world, consisting of basically any account (of a naturalist or humanist variety) that doesn't have room for the sorts of non-natural (transcendent, etc.) phenomena that a non-naturalist is interested in, is responsible for lots of bad things in our culture, such as the loss of meaning, frustrations, and anger. Non-naturalists say, in other words, that *this-worldly points of view are nihilistic*. Nihilism of this sort is the clear enemy in Dreyfus and Kelly's diagnoses of modernity, and equally so in Taylor's when he says that exclusive humanism and the denial of the metaphysical affirmation of the primacy of ordinary life leaves the practical primacy insufficiently connected to the meanings and backgrounds that would support it. So non-naturalists accuse their opponents of nihilism.

The question here is if this is a legitimate charge that the non-naturalists make against "this-worldly" viewpoints, and if non-naturalists can in fact be faced

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[8] Thomson pp. 149-152 also discusses Nietzsche as a counterpoint to Taylor; my contrast between "this-worldly" and "otherworldly" nihilisms is in that respect indebted to his discussion in that paper.

with the same accusation. My *first Nietzschean objection* is that transcendent

viewpoints can in fact themselves be justly accused of nihilism. Nietzsche would no

doubt characterize Taylor's desire for transcendence as a retreat from the world, a

case of resentment of this world manifested by a yearning for a transcendent

elsewhere. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche denounces "all the *unnatural*

inclinations, all those aspirations to the beyond, to that which runs counter to sense,

instinct, nature, animal, in short all ideals hitherto, which are one and all hostile to

life and ideals that slander the world" (II, 24). Nietzsche considers nihilism to be the

loss – *not* of connectedness with transcendent sources of value, as the non-

naturalists have it – but instead of "our love of [man], our reverence for him, our

hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary – what is

nihilism today if not *that*? – We are weary *of man*" (I, 13).

So against the non-naturalist conception of nihilism, we have the Nietzschean

definition wherein nihilism consists of yearning *for* transcendence and the

subsequent contempt for earthly existence and the loss of appreciation for the

world we inhabit and should say yes to. Robert Pippin affirms this reading of

Nietzsche's definition of nihilism when he calls it an "erotic failure" or a "failure of

desire" (20, 54), by which I take him to mean a fundamental misdirection of our

longings and yearnings away from this world and toward the transcendent. While

Nietzsche does not tell us explicitly how to combat nihilism, Pippin argues, the

opposing paradigm to it would for Nietzsche be "Any such desire [that] can only be

found and inspired and sustained *in* a certain sort of world, a world where some

intense dissatisfaction can be balanced by an aspiration at home in that very world,

a world, in other words, lovable enough to inspire as well as frustrate" (56). So the first Nietzschean objection says that nihilism amounts to otherworldly yearnings, not exclusively this-worldly attention as the non-naturalists would have it.

Nietzsche, then, embodies precisely the denial of the metaphysical affirmation of life that Taylor thinks is so damaging, while Taylor's search for transcendence would no doubt strike Nietzsche as an embodiment of the "ascetic ideal" to which so many past philosophers have fallen victim. Nietzsche mocks the pretensions of the philosophical search for transcendence when he says:

> To renounce belief in one's ego, to deny one's own "reality"–
> what a triumph! Not merely over the senses, over appearance,
> but a much higher kind of triumph, a violation and cruelty
> against *reason* – a voluptuous pleasure that reaches its height
> when the ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery of reason
> declares: "*there is* a realm of truth and being, but reason is
> *excluded* from it!" (III, 12)

This, it seems to me, is exactly the kind of frustrated response to a brazen display of faith and religiosity that one might want to give to Taylor's insertion of Christian monotheism into his otherwise rigorous discussions of modernity. Taylor has *faith* in the monotheist alternative; that there are problems inherent in modernity seems obvious enough, and indeed Taylor goes a long way toward identifying those issues, but the role of a form of monotheism within modernity is eminently less obvious. Therefore, reason is indeed necessarily excluded from that realm of his system, and

a justifiable philosophical response to faith by anyone who does not share it could very well be one of Nietzschean anger. I am extremely sympathetic to this sort of response to Christianity.

But there is an even more potentially damaging point here about bringing up Nietzsche's discussion of ascetic ideals in connection with Taylor, and this has to do with Thomson's interpretation of Taylor as a simultaneous ontological monist and theoretical pluralist (Cf. Thomson, pp. 142-143). The fact that Taylor holds these two competing positions indicates an inconsistency in his philosophical program. This suspicion is crystallized by Nietzsche's forceful charge against the ascetic ideal that it represents a totalizing form of monism:

> The ascetic ideal has a *goal* – this goal is so universal that all the other interests of human existence seem, when compared with it, petty and narrow; it interprets epochs, nations, and men inexorably with a view to this one goal; it permits no other interpretation, no other goal; it rejects, denies, affirms, and sanctions solely from the point of view of *its* interpretation…it believes that no power exists on earth that does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to exist, a value, as a tool of the ascetic ideal, as a way and means to its goal, to one goal. (III, 23)

It is well nigh impossible to lay *all* these charges at Taylor's feet, especially because, as we have seen, his theoretical pluralism, his faith in a "diversity of goods," is

extremely robust and his arguments against totalizing forms of ethics and epistemology are so powerful. But as Thomson seems to be pointing out, Taylor's monotheism is made all the more puzzling and mystifying by the very strength of that pluralism in other domains. A monotheistic worldview, even when coupled with a robust rejection of codifications and nomolatry, cannot help but be totalizing and exclusionary in just the way Nietzsche describes here when he talks about the ascetic ideal.

If nothing else, monotheism *does* see other worldviews as "petty and narrow" – indeed, this is more or less exactly how Taylor talks about "exclusive humanism" and naturalism, at least when compared with the Christian spirituality that Taylor lauds. It could be that Taylor is somehow sneaking in this dismissive, totalizing attitude along with his generous and open-minded pluralism. Nihilism could in fact *follow from* this non-naturalist monotheistic program instead of be *fought off* by it in just the following two ways. First is the inherent problem with yearning for otherworldly transcendence – which is, as Nietzsche pointed out, a rejection of this world and a manifestation of a resentment of it, a need to fatten it up with some form of transcendent grounding, which is precisely what Taylor calls for again and again. This rejection of the world, this turning away from reality, this retreat to the transcendent clouds, *really* constitutes nihilism.

The second way such a view is nihilistic depends on an even more psychologized account, which goes something like the following. Armed with a strong, deeply felt metaphysical monism (that there is a unified meaning to the

world that follows from belief in God), the monotheist can only see the onslaught of competing immanent views that have gained traction in the culture (naturalism, humanism, formalist ethics, scientism) as cause for the profoundest despair, anger, and frustration (in exactly the way that Taylor diagnoses secularist universalism as inevitably leading to such feelings). All this might suggest to the monist going *back toward the transcendent* as a way of fleeing from these new and threatening paradigms, fleeing away from this-worldly views and back to an otherworldly cosmology with an increased intellectual vigor and faith. This strategy might be what Taylor labels his "project of retrieval"; retrieval of past ways of thinking might instead be a codeword for *retreat* – retreat from the advancements of modernity that have chipped away at the Christianity that Taylor is so invested in. This is not a strategy against nihilism, even if it thinks of itself as such. It is rather a factor that fundamentally contributes to it by responding to competing views by retreating from the world and resenting it.

So we know now why Taylor thinks monotheism is the right course forward (because it supports what secularism cannot on its own); but in considering the Nietzschean conception of nihilism as yearning for transcendence rather than abandoning it, we see what is very, very wrong with it, too, and this objection raises profound questions about the efficacy and indeed the internal consistency of Taylor's non-naturalist program and its ability to combat cultural nihilism. What this first Nietzschean objection indicates is that, indeed, Taylor's point of view *contributes to* nihilism instead of making it seem more bearable.

Given this charge that Taylor's transcendent yearnings represent a nihilistic dread of doing without the transcendent, another question follows. Is he wrong that there is an important foundational connection between the practical and metaphysical primacies? *Pace* Taylor, in other words, *can we* affirm the practical primacy of life while denying the metaphysical? Must we become nihilists by denying the metaphysical primacy of life? If not, what else would we be? Taylor thinks that the simultaneous denial of the metaphysical and the affirmation of the practical is something like what we are already doing in secular modernity, but that it is not sustainable or workable. Is he wrong? Given the great doubts about Taylor's arguments that I've raised here, it's worth asking if the position he rejects (affirming the practical, denying the metaphysical) is actually more attractive than he makes it out to be. Later I'll consider what taking the first Nietzschean objection to heart would mean, and the implication of my conclusion there is that there is no need, indeed no room for, a metaphysical affirmation.

C. Taylor Against Exclusive Humanism

So we have just seen that, although his descriptive account of human behavior can for the most part function on its own without monotheistic commitments, Taylor's critique of secular modernity relies crucially on monotheism, making the commitments that follow from it an important component of his overall non-naturalist program. In the last chapter we saw what Taylor thinks monotheism is capable of, namely supporting the practical primacy of ordinary life, which we will call his *positive* argument in favor of monotheism; here we will look at his negative

criticisms of the inefficacies of what he calls "exclusive humanism," which he defines as "the view that human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether" ("A Catholic modernity?", 172), thus comprising his *negative* argument in favor of exclusive humanism's opposite, Christian monotheism. Taylor's fear of exclusive humanism is a fear about nihilism – for as we have seen, a non-naturalist like Taylor thinks of nihilism as the denial of transcendence, which is indeed his primary objection to exclusive humanism. Remember that last time we also endorsed the Nietzschean argument *against* transcendence (the first Nietzschean objection), concluding that Taylor's monotheistic commitments constitute a lingering nihilistic dread of life on its own terms and without the transcendent. Given these strong suspicions about the viability of Taylor's monotheistic non-naturalism, I'll begin to examine here the possibility of alternatives to transcendence as the focal grounding point of our culture, which will lead to next chapter's second Nietzschean objection.

Taylor's negative argument against exclusive humanism can be described as a three-pronged attack on its inability to support the goals of secular modernity, which as we know he believes can only be grounded by a transcendental vision. As I'll describe them here, each of the three prongs of the negative argument constitutes *the inability of exclusive humanism to accomplish an important goal of secular modernity*. The *first* prong of the negative attack has to do with exclusive humanism's *inability to provide compelling motivation to act on behalf of others based on the inherent value of a person*. Humanism, Taylor says, involves the belief that humans "have a certain dignity. My feelings of self-worth connect intellectually and emotionally with my sense of the worth of human beings. Here is where secular

humanism is tempted to congratulate itself" (183). However, we fall into despair

when we see that in practice we have failed to do justice to this crucial belief (this

phenomenon is dealt with in the second prong of the attack). But the reason we fall

into despair, he argues, has to do with the modern "disenchantment" – the

insistence, implied by modern natural science, that "the universe in which we find

ourselves is totally devoid of human meaning" ("Disenchantment-reenchantment,"

292). What we're left with after disenchantment is appeal to crude forms of

projectivism or materialism, or shallow accounts of moral behavior such as those

Taylor argued against in "The diversity of goods" and in Part I of *Sources of the Self*.

Only by appeal to strong evaluations and qualitative distinctions can sense be made

of our sense of worth and place in the universe ("Disenchantment," 295-299).

But the point here is that the depth of the value of human life cannot properly

be made sense of by exclusive humanism, which without appeal to the transcendent

can't account for strong evaluation (which always involves higher callings and

orientation to the good). The issue is one of motivation – a superficial immanent

account of value (one that ignores strong evaluations) isn't enough to justify

universalism. So without such an account, "the love of the human…can gradually

come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression" ("Catholic," 183). There is

no pure motivation to act out of love for humankind because the value of human life

is not properly understood in the narrow terms of exclusive humanism.

All this leads to the *second* prong, which can be described as exclusive

humanism's *inability to stop reversals of benevolent impulses into despair and*

violence because of frustrated zealotry. Without the transcendent, we are looking at

"the possible fate of a culture that has aimed higher than its moral sources can

sustain" (181). As inheritors of the practical primacy of ordinary life, we have

significantly higher standards "for solidarity and benevolence…than ever before"

(182). But the ugly truth of these high standards is that "faced with the immense

disappointments of actual human performance and with the myriad ways in which

real, concrete human beings fall short of, ignore, parody, and betray this magnificent

potential, one experiences a growing sense of anger and futility" (183). This anger is

what Taylor calls a "reversal" from exclusive humanism's initially high hopes:

> This humanism leaves us with our own high sense of self-worth to
>
> keep us from backsliding, a high notion of human worth to inspire us
>
> forward, and a flaming indignation against wrong and oppression to
>
> energize us. It cannot appreciate how problematic all of these are,
>
> how easily they can slide into something trivial, ugly, or downright
>
> dangerous and destructive. (185)

This is the great paradox of the humanistic attitude, for Taylor: by leaving the

transcendent totally out of the picture, our aspirations are disconnected from their

spiritual origin (the idea that we are made in the image of God and are therefore

inherently worthy of the rights we strive to encode), and this unusual historical

situation and the ignorance it brings with it lead to a profound lack of understanding

on the part of those living in secular modernity of the dangerous pitfalls of their own

high hopes – the reversal of the heights of humanism results in sliding into despair

and zealotry. Failing to appreciate the connection between the metaphysical affirmation of the primacy of ordinary life and the practical primacy leads to a failure to appreciate the dark underside of these high hopes.

The *third* prong of the negative argument against exclusive humanism refers to the *inability to come to terms with the meaning of death*. Taylor seems to think that an exclusively humanistic account of death can't comprehend the depth of "the connection of death with meaning" ("The sting of death," 3): "we are "plunged into a sense of meaning. And the meaning seems denied by certain kinds of ending. That's why the greatest crisis around death comes from the death of someone we love" (2). Haunted as ever by "the sense that there is something more," Taylor argues that a secular-humanist view of death fails to fully understand (1) "the issue of what we have lived for…the question of meaning" that we are confronted with when we face death; and (2) the desire to "connect [a deceased loved one], even in his death, with something eternal, or at the very least ongoing" (3). Just as the value of life is not properly understood in terms of motivating action (prong one), the third prong presses the issue of the value of a lived human life. Here again Taylor worries that the denial of the transcendent closes off our appreciation of the fullness of the question of what a life amounts to and why, in this case, death matters.

Taken together, what do the three prongs of Taylor's negative argument against exclusive humanism amount to? The absence of transcendence cripples exclusive humanism; without that awareness of and connection to the transcendent, exclusive humanism cannot set out to do what it hopes to do (extend universal

human rights, create a global justice). That's the negative argument; adherence to

monotheistic commitments in the context of a secular age, however, can accomplish

this: the positive argument. What both arguments really amount to is an appeal to

transcendence – which accounts for the inherent value of a person (prong one), the

ability to stop reversals (prong two), and the significance of death (prong three), as

well as the appeal to Christianity. When transcendence is abandoned or cut off, bad

consequences follow. While Taylor doesn't use the terminology of nihilism in the

discussions we're considering here, nihilism – as defined, for example by Dreyfus

and Kelly, as the lack of access to the transcendence – is precisely the specter on the

horizon of Western culture that Taylor is so profoundly worried about.[9]

But as we saw in our previous examinations of the positive argument, there

are two levels of doubt about Taylor's proposed monotheistic alternative. The first

level of doubt has to do with the viability of a religious form of life as a guarantor of

humanism's goals given the track record of religion as itself a harbinger of the

frustrations and violence that Taylor sees as the dangerous threat of exclusive

humanism. These doubts, which are based basically on historical evidence, persist

here. The second level of doubt, though, has to do with the latent nihilism of

transcendence itself, the existence of which was seen by Nietzsche and which I

raised last time with what I call my first Nietzschean objection. Here, in our

examination of the negative argument, with that possibility in mind, we'll look at the

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[9] In the paper "Recovering the sacred," Taylor says that Dreyfus and Kelly's "warnings of the dangers of nihilism and the exclusive adoption of the technological understanding of being are tremendously insightful and important" (124). I take Taylor's agreement there to be a fairly deep and important one between his own conception of nihilism (seen here in his arguments against "exclusive humanism") and the definition proposed by Dreyfus and Kelly in *All Things Shining*.

possibility of there being *alternatives* to transcendence as the only possible grounding for a deep appreciation of life.

A central tenet of non-naturalist treatments of modernity is that secularism excludes or fails to fully appreciate *the sacred*. The intellectual historian Peter E. Gordon challenges this argument in Taylor's case, arguing that Taylor is relying on a definition of the sacred that is inherently narrow and therefore exclusionary. According to Gordon, for Taylor the sacred can only amount to the Axial notion of the sacred as *transcendent*: "the Axial revolution introduced a metaphysical and normative rupture between the profane sphere of everyday existence and the higher realm *beyond* the world, a *transcendent* realm toward which human beings now directed their moral striving and their spiritual devotion" (128). So when Taylor says the sacred is left out by secularism/exclusive humanism, he's really saying that we have just left transcendence behind, because "For Taylor, in other words, it seems clear that the sacred *just is* the transcendent, and other possibilities may be logically thinkable but they are no longer live options in the post-Axial world" (129). Taylor does not want to admit the possibility of competing definitions of the sacred as possible in our age; the sacred *must* amount to the transcendent.

Against this rather narrow and necessarily exclusionary definition, Gordon proposes that "we might think of the transcendence model as both revealing *and* concealing aspects of the sacred experience…we might feel moved to ask whether there are any marginal practices that *conflict with* the dominant metaphysical picture" (135). With Gordon, then, we must ask now what languages of description

we use (or could use) to describe the sacred that do not adhere to "the very distinction between transcendence and immanence" (138). This means thinking of modernity as "a completely new stage that may permit us truly to cast off the language of the Axial revolution itself" (138). Seeing modernity anew in this way means rejecting both transcendence talk such as that favored by Taylor, as well as rejecting exclusive humanism – which, after all, inherits the same distinction between transcendence and immanence that the transcendent proponents cleave to: secularism just casts off the transcendent, thus enforcing the distinction in seeing the exclusion of one from the other as possible. The upshot of Gordon's argument is that we have to keep ourselves alive to other possibilities for our culture's foundations than those imagined by both theistic transcendence proponents and exclusive humanists, and instead imagine new languages that describe the sacred in terms that do not see a radical gulf between this world and sacred meanings.

In the next chapter, I'll expand on this insight that theism and secular humanism share a certain structure of values with my second Nietzschean objection to secular humanism, the implication of which will be that other possibilities than those two have to be imagined. The point of this discussion is that Taylor's arguments against exclusive humanism, which constitute his great anxieties about nihilism, rely on the traditional non-naturalist story about the denial of transcendence (with which he equates the sacred) in favor of immanence. Gordon has shown us, however, that equating the sacred just with the transcendent marginalizes and excludes other options (though he is much less clear about what those other options actually look like). My first Nietzschean objection that the desire

for transcendence itself amounts to a form of nihilism dovetails with Gordon's point here to raise profound suspicions about transcendence as a means of grounding our cultural values. Taylor's enemy humanism will be critiqued in the next chapter as a latent yearning for religiosity. In contrast to both those paradigms, at the end of Part II (II E), I will articulate a new possible way of joyfully affirming life.

D. A Critique of Secularist Equivalent Replacement

In chapter II C, we considered Taylor's negative arguments against exclusive humanism, concluding that his alignment of the sacred with transcendence excluded other modes of appreciating the sacred in our culture. We proposed taking up Peter Gordon's call to see modernity as "a completely new stage that may permit us to truly cast off the language of the Axial revolution itself" (138), and we concluded that we should search for other languages with which to affirm life. Here we will frame the discussion in the following way: how we understand qualitative distinctions and how we describe sacred experiences without recourse to the transcendent is the central problem of secular modernity, which has so far sought to throw off the chains of religion by *replacing* religion with something that fills the gaps and needs that its absence will force upon our culture. How do we accomplish this goal, which responds to the specter of nihilism raised earlier? If the goal of secularism is to be more than a negative attack on religion, if its purpose is to offer a more robust form of life that takes into account the place religion previously occupied in our culture, then what should secularism consist in? I'll consider two

related proposals for modeling secular humanism by Philip Kitcher and John Dewey that are broadly *naturalistic* in character but which I conclude ultimately fall victim to a *second* Nietzschean objection that they amount to a mere weak "equivalent replacement" of religion. (Remember that the first Nietzschean objection was to Taylor's insistence on the necessity of transcendence.) To conclude I'll consider what possible intellectual tools we have to meet the Nietzschean objection and arrive at a genuinely secular future, and I'll end by tentatively supporting an anti-humanist secular proposal.

First, what does it mean to say that secularism has to fill the gaps left by religion? The issue is that religion is more than a set of doctrinal beliefs about the supernatural and the transcendent; it also fills a variety of social and psychological functions in our culture. As I see it, there are three possible secularist responses to this proposition about religion. *First* is a hard-line, eliminativist response, which simply denies or downplays the validity of the claim. This entails saying either that religion is wholly poisonous and silly or that the social value of religion is almost entirely subordinate to the importance of eradicating the false and irrational beliefs it imparts to its followers. The upshot of the hard-line response is to just get rid of religion, cultural consequences be damned. *Second* is what I'll call thin secularism, which recognizes the need to replace religion with *something* but doesn't offer a particularly robust method of doing so, relying mostly on the tools of secularism itself to do so. The thin secularist response is exemplified by Daniel Dennett, who in a lecture sought to go about "preserving what's worth preserving" from religion by "ransacking the tool-house of religion" to take what is good about it and leave the

rest out. The reason his response is a *thin* secularist one is that it amounted to selectively replacing religious rituals with TED talks, bird watching, and "secular gospel music," without an appreciation of the fullness and richness of the functions of religion, a task that, if we're honest, calls for less gimmicky replacements. Dennett's proposal is essentially the New Atheist equivalent of Dreyfus and Kelly's coffee and football games.

The *third*, most interesting response to the problem of replacing religion is what I'll broadly refer to as *robust secularism*, examples of which I'll consider below. These responses take seriously the role of religion in our culture, and seek to develop a secularism that is not merely a negation of religion but one that offers genuine sustenance to those who live with it. Furthermore, these responses are more thoughtful about what's worth preserving, taking seriously the risk of post-faith nihilism and offering rigorous *ethical* answers to the questions religion used to be answering. Still, I conclude that even robust secularism fails to truly move us past religion. I'll now consider two examples, closely related, of robust secularism.[10]

The first such example is presented by John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*. Dewey there distinguishes *religious* attitudes, which are worth preserving and are indeed essential to the realization of human ideals, from *religion*, the doctrinal belief in the supernatural which should be abandoned: "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal and against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of

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[10] If you suspect that robust secularism doesn't sound vastly different from thin secularism, you're right to think so. I hope that by the end of this chapter I'll raise doubts about whether there is such a deep difference between the two. The point for now at least is that the robust secularists certainly do think there is such a difference (Cf. Kitcher's disdain for "Darwinian atheists," 24).

conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality" (27). The association of religious attitudes with religion is just a historical contingency (we just so happened to have made this association because there has thus far been no viable non-religion alternative way of doing so) – "conditions are now ripe," he says, to completely "emancipate" the attitudes from the doctrines (84). He goes on to argue that our ideals are better served by tying them to their actual, "natural" sources in the human condition and society than by associating them with supernatural sources (Cf. 51-52). These ideals can exist on a human level solely.

Dewey also wants us to revere the *natural* sources of our ideals – he calls this attitude "natural piety" (58). The goals of humanity can be described in natural terms only. Human solidarity is better served by freeing the religious attitude from its supernatural content – explanation of human aspirations and hopes must exist at the social and human level, and this appeal to natural sources will serve progress better than tying hope to the supernatural. By natural sources of our ideals, Dewey means the "goods actually experienced" in society, or what he calls the "natural relations of husband and wife, of parent and child, friend and friend, neighbor and neighbor, of fellow workers in industry, science, and art" (71). Another natural source he appeals to later is what he calls "natural agencies": "impulses toward affection, compassion and justice, equality and freedom" (81).

What Dewey's naturalism amounts to is faith in the spirit of human cooperation and solidarity: "the cooperative and communicative operations of human beings living together...the unification of human desire and purpose, [which]

furnishes a sufficient creed for human acceptance, one that would provide a

religious release and reinforcement of knowledge" (86). The sources of our faith are

natural and real and situated within the "grace of the doings and sufferings of the

continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of

conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have

received that those who came after us may receive more solid and secure" (87). The

upshot of Dewey is that the goals of religion are laudable and central to human life –

and are better served by human solidarity grounded in natural conditions and

human predilections.[11] Dewey's is a naturalistic ethics, a faith in humanity among

humans to create a better society using the tools secular modernity has developed

for itself.[12]

A second example of robust secularism comes from Philip Kitcher, who takes

A Common Faith as one of his touchstones. His main point is that secularism needs

to respond to the most compelling aspects of religion: "Successful religions meet

psychological and social needs, responding to human anxieties and yearnings,

binding people together" (29). Thus the faithful view the loss of religion as a threat.

To this sense of fear or dread, Kitcher replies that secularists must "inquire into the

character of the perceived threat, into what exactly the believer thinks would be lost

in abandoning belief, and to articulate secularism as a set of positive responses to

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[11] Note the similarity here to Taylor's historical argument about the realization of Christian goals by secularism ("A Catholic modernity?", pp. 171-177).

[12] It seems to me that a contemporary revisiting of many of Dewey's political ideals in *A Common Faith* (and elsewhere, of course) occurs in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, where Dewey's political conclusions are provided a new philosophical justification by Rorty's eclectic form of pragmatism. An interesting comparison might be made of the relative successes of Rorty's account versus Kitcher's own Deweyan explorations.

those potential losses. To follow that path would be to transmute secularism (as blunt denial) into secular *human*ism" (33). As robust secularists are wont to do, Kitcher is taking religion seriously and providing a positive response to those perceived losses.

Kitcher asks what a secularist ethics can say about human valuation and about right and wrong. He comes to the conclusion that "secularists face a dilemma of their own: departures from naturalism are both unconvincing and antithetical to the line of reasoning that repudiates the supernatural [Kitcher follows Dewey there; Cf. lecture 1 of *Faith*], while naturalistic explanations of ethical practice are inadequate and fallacious" (40). I'll say more about the summary dismissal of non-naturalism later, but for now what's important is that Kitcher comes up with an evolutionary story about ethics ("to understand ethics, as one understands religious belief, as a historical phenomenon") to resolve the dilemma. He proposes thinking of ethics as "a form of *social technology*" that has been designed by humans to respond to moral challenges; thus "Progress [in ethics, e.g., the abolishment of slavery] is to be understood in terms of the *evolution from* the initial state, not as *steps toward* some final ethical system" (41-42). We have gotten better and better at responding to these challenges, so the social technology of our ethics has gotten overall progressively better.[13]

In these evolutionary terms, ethics is given, Kitcher thinks, real significance and communal importance without recourse to religious talk. Such a conception

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[13] As a possible counterpoint to this evolutionary story, see my comments on Kuhn with reference to Taylor's complaints against Enlightenment "myths" in chapter I C.

explains how progress occurs and gives humans credit for their own success, giving

an account of why we are so invested in our human ethical projects. Armed with this

ethics, secular humanism "should reject both the demand that genuine human

purposes must connect to cosmic purposes and the exceptionalism that pervades

ancient treatments of the good life. Individuals give their lives purpose and meaning

by defining for themselves what matters most, shaping those lives around projects

and relationships" (45). This robust form of secularism, incorporating an

evolutionary-naturalistic narrative about ethics and a this-worldly concentration of

human society, is Kitcher's formulation of what a positive response to the loss of

religion would entail.

One final aspect of Kitcher's project is important here, and this has to do with

his response to Taylor's assertion that secularism lacks the "fullness" of

transcendence. Taylor uses the example of a religious epiphany as something that

can't be adequately processed in secular terms, a case Kitcher treats very subtly (Cf.

51-55). But what's significant about Kitcher's response for our purposes is his

concession that, "*as things currently stand*," religion *is* better than secularism at

processing such an experience: precisely because religious has been designed and

has evolved in order to accommodate experiences like epiphanies. Kitcher ends by

saying that the epiphany example is not merely "a secularist loss, but [represents]

challenges to develop ways of sustaining those experiences we take to be most

important that will be as powerful as those supplied by long-evolved religious

traditions" (55).

The task for secularism, Kitcher is saying, is to develop ways of understanding and describing experiences that have hitherto been understood only in religious terms. And this point is an important one of agreement between Dewey and Kitcher: the project of secularism is, to a significant degree, one of the *replacement of religion* by naturalistic secularism. So we take experiences, like epiphanies, hopes, and other passionate states, and discard the old religious interpretations and replace them with new secular ones that have as a backdrop a naturalistic ethical view. There's a certain simplicity to it all: Religious attitudes are just fine, Dewey says, as long as they have the proper, progressive, secularist grounding, not that institutional religious mumbo-jumbo. We just need to wait, Kitcher says: in time, secularism will develop ways to take the place of religious interpretations of certain experiences.[14] To provide our culture with a new grounding, then, we just *put secularism in the place of religion*. Secularism will fulfill religion's cultural roles, and we can dispense with God. What the robust secularists offer, in other words, is a *strategy of equivalent replacement*.

There's a deep problem with this formulation that I want to raise here, and it is brought to light by an argument about atheism made by Nietzsche. This is what I call *the second Nietzschean objection*. Nietzsche points out at the end of the *Genealogy* that atheists who think they have freed themselves from the whole religious/theological outlook through their rational rigor and scientific spirit are in fact playing the same game as the theists – they have the same standards of

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[14] Kitcher's confident attitude of "Wait and see, secularism will prove to be just as effective as religion" amounts to pretty much the same thing, incidentally, as what Dennett says about secularist traditions like the new gospel music. See this chapter, ff. 10.

acceptability, the same criteria for certainty – "*for they still have faith in truth*" (III, 24). In simply denying the conclusions of theism (disproving the existence of God, for example, or replacing faith in God with faith in science), these atheists exhibit the exact same "will to truth" as any religious believer; they just come to opposing conclusions about God: "This pair, science and the ascetic ideal, both rest on the same foundation…on the same overestimation of truth" (III, 25).

Atheism of a more fundamental, more truly *alternative* sort, Nietzsche says, must accept that "The will to truth requires a critique…the value of truth must for once be experimentally *called into question*" (III, 24). Genuine atheism is "*not* the antithesis of that ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences – it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*" (III, 27). Atheism is not just the inversion of the value of truth to conclude that God does not exist instead of concluding that he does; atheism of the truest sort is a rejection of the entire edifice of wondering about the truth about God. Atheism is to reject the game itself.

So this Nietzschean objection as applied to secularism means that a genuine secularist alternative would involve more than just replacing religion with secularist alternatives, more than just making it so that secularism occupies an equivalent position in our culture as religion once did. No strategy that purports to move beyond religion should concede that religion's fundamental yearnings are worth saving. Such a strategy is the equivalent of Nietzsche's "free, *very* free spirits" (III,

24) who think they have done away with religion totally but who in fact are still relying on religion's ideal of truth. The Nietzschean objection, then, would indicate that a genuine secularist progression beyond religion would involve a complete rejection of the whole framework of values that religion represents.

As it stands, the robust secularist alternative readily accepts that framework – we ought to try to understand sacred experiences, for example (Kitcher), or to preserve the religious attitudes (Dewey). We just need to do so in modified, secularist terms. The Nietzschean objection forcefully says that something much more radical – nothing less than an "awe-inspiring *catastrophe*" – is required to truly get beyond religion into a secularist future. Secular humanism rejects worship of the gods, yes, but in retaining the religious attitudes, it continues to worship truth in the way Nietzsche describes – for instead of rejecting those attitudes, which we should do for reasons I'll argue next chapter, it retains them, implicitly endorsing them, and proceeds to dress them up differently. This is the force of my objection to secular humanism.[15]

The question now is *how this applies to the practice of secularism*. What would such a secularist "catastrophe" look like? Among the tools we've considered thus far, naturalism is already out as a genuine possible alternative – for it is the ethical touchstone for the robust secularist strategies that we've considered and

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[15] Interestingly, Taylor anticipates the terms in which I'm putting the issue. In numerous places (e.g., "A Catholic modernity?", pp. 177-181; *Sources of the Self*, chapter 4), he says that the debate about modernity has three camps: theistic believers, secular humanists, and neo-Nietzschean anti-humanists. He puts himself in the first camp; Kitcher and Dewey are in the second; and I seem to be leaning towards the third.

which we've concluded fail to meet the second Nietzschean objection. What about non-naturalism, which Kitcher rejects out of hand when he brands "nonnatural properties, faculties of moral perception or ethical intuition, commands of pure practical reason and the like" as too close to supernaturalism (40)? While I think that non-naturalism deserves a more thorough treatment than Kitcher gives it (which is indeed what we have been attempting in our examination of it thus far, especially in Part I), I agree with him to the extent that non-naturalism is really a dressing-down of theism, which is a possible implication of my interpretation of Taylor's monotheism – not to mention the profound connection between non-naturalism and nihilism that we saw with the first Nietzschean objection. In the terms of our new Nietzschean objection, non-naturalism is furthermore just a replacement of theism in more nebulous terms, and a dangerous one at that.

So the question remains what a truly radical break would look like. As the terms of the second objection might imply, the answer might have something to do with *truth*. The secularist/theist debate is just one between one version of the truth and the inversion of it: the existence and nonexistence of God, religious language versus nonreligious language that at least nods to the objects of attention of the religious languages. Within the terms of that debate, there has been no radical break. Nietzsche writes that to say yes to life while also being cognizant of the "fictions of logic" and "false judgments" that allow us to get around in the world would mean "To recognize untruth as a condition of life – that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that risks

this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §4).

What we've arrived at then is a kind of *anti*-humanist alternative for how secularism should look: a deep recognition (indeed, an embrace) of the profound contingency of our values and judgments, a rejection of the truth terms in which debates about values have taken place between theists and secular humanists. I think Gordon had something like this in mind when talked about his "Heideggerian proposal" of rejecting the Axial languages of description and trying to listen to the "marginal phenomena" that have been shunted aside in our Axial culture (138-139). For those of us dissatisfied with theism as well as the wishy-washy language of replacement offered by secular humanists, the alternative is to turn our backs on the whole logic of the debate and to try to discover what those "marginal phenomena" are that the theist/secular humanist debate ignores – that is, *a way of being that really has no religious attitudes*. Our task now is to describe that way of being in terms beyond good and evil – beyond theism and secular humanism. What we'll consider next, then, is what it would mean to say yes to life *as it is* through a joyful mode of being-in-the-world that allows us to strive for a better life within our world without any religious attitudes.

E: Joyful Being-in-the-World: Moving Beyond the Religious Attitudes

My second Nietzschean objection, raised in chapter II D, was a critique of the secular humanist strategy of equivalent replacement, charging that that strategy accepts the terms and value structure of religion only to replace it with a humanistic spin on the "religious attitudes" (to adopt Dewey's phrase) that it seeks to preserve, all the while purporting to really move us beyond religion itself. The objection suggests that just as the atheists who rationally dismiss the existence of God ultimately embrace the same will to truth as do their theistic opponents, so too do the secular humanists accept the same value structure as do the religious. The issue facing us now is to explicate what that value structure is, what it means, and whether it is *historically inherited* and therefore able to be rejected if we so choose, or *inherently and genuinely human* and therefore both undesirable and impossible to dislodge. If the latter is the case, then the Nietzschean objection fades away as a mere radical fantasy – but if the former is true, if the religious attitudes, *as we have understood them* (that is, as theists and secular humanists have agreed to see them), are really historical contingencies that we can jettison if we really want to *move beyond* religion instead of just replacing it with a watered-down version, then we are faced with the challenge of sketching what a genuinely, *radically* post-religious culture looks like. I will argue that we can view the religious attitudes as eminently able to be jettisoned, and I will suggest what a joyful, post-religious mode of being that would replace them could be, involving an embrace of the fact of our being thrown into the world, and a profound concern for our future possibilities.

A good starting point for understanding the religious/theological structure of values, one with which we are by now quite familiar, is Taylor's non-naturalistic transcendental human agency, because it requires contact with an external source of transcendence. For Taylor, remember, we are strong evaluators, makers of qualitative distinctions, for whom our moral lives exist along the three axes: what it is good to do (obligations), what it is good to be (virtues), and what is worthy of my love (the good) (*Sources of the Self*, 15). This third axis is, as we will see, where Taylor most obviously can be criticized for extrapolating from the historical what he purports to be a fundamental fact of *human nature* – for transcendental human agency is, according to Taylor, no mere *contingent* fact (à la psychological "dispositions," as in Bernard Williams) (Cf. *Sources*, 27), but instead something deeply, fundamentally true about ourselves that we cannot avoid – as much as formalist moral theory and ethical naturalism want it to be, as we saw with our explorations of this critical aspect of Taylor's non-naturalism in Part I. So for Taylor, transcendental human agency is *fundamental* to human being and cannot as such be jettisoned as a mere historical inheritance.

But an historicist can come in here and accuse Taylor of stacking the deck in his own favor by calling an historically inherited interpretation of human agency a fundamental part of human nature. This is the general strategy of Gordon's objection to Taylor's equating of the sacred with the transcendent. (On Gordon's reading, Taylor necessarily links the two and excludes other possible definitions of the sacred; Cf. Gordon 129-134.) So we might ask in the same vein: *Why* must we desire to be in contact with the good, that external source of value? Why does Taylor

insist that "we cannot do without an orientation to the good" (*Sources*, 47)? With

Gordon, then, we can ask why the *transcendent* – for this is really what we are

talking about when we talk about an external good with which we desire contact;

transcendence is the salient aspect of Taylor's third axis that distinguishes it as a

transcendental value system, an aspect of Taylor's program questioned by Gordon,

albeit in a different context – needs to be our guiding light.

I think we can conclude that *once we see* this yearning for the good by Taylor

as an historical inheritance (to be more specific: as coming from the Axial *exclusion*

of anything external value and transcendence as our guiding light, as per Gordon's

argument), then we can come to see that his transcendental human agency, while

indeed extremely powerful in our culture and historical tradition, isn't so

fundamentally *human* after all. Yearning to be in contact with the good is *what we*

have learned that we must do. Much as the project is flawed (as I have been arguing),

secular humanism does at least point to the fact that we can do without the non-

naturalistic goods and transcendent yearnings that our monotheistic past has

handed down to us, to the possibility that there can be some kind of progress

beyond transcendence. We can learn that much from the secular humanists, even if

we do think that they fail to go far enough in imagining this possibility.

So the point of these historicist objections to Taylor on transcendental (and

indeed transcendent) human agency is to show what the general style of objection

to transcendent/religious value structures looks like. We point out that what they

tell us are *fundamental* aspects of human moral identity needn't be fundamental if in

fact they can be traced to some extent to certain historical inheritances. I want to apply this strategy of objection to what secular humanists think of as "worth preserving" – the secular humanist mantra, from Dennett to Dewey – from religion. I want to suggest that to achieve the goal of *truly moving into a post-religious future*, we have to reject those transcendent and religious attitudes and envision a human nature that relies on none of those attitudes. We need to re-envision what our deepest-held values can be.

How can we describe the religious attitudes? What are the feelings religion has been so good at assuaging? People want to feel that they genuinely matter. Thrown into a world without our consent, as Heidegger says in *Being and Time* – "Dasein has been thrown into existence. It exists as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be" (II, 2, §57) – we want to feel less alone. Faced with mortality and the finitude and fragility of human life, people want to feel that meanings exist beyond this mortal coil into an elsewhere. What *mattering* means is that there is a frame beyond the individual life that exists and in which we simply are, and of which our values form a part. Part of mattering in this *substantive* way (more than the thin mattering of being worthy of dignity, say, or of being treated with a certain respect, or as holding certain rights) is also *love*. Religion answers the drive to love someone and to feel loved in return – to exist in a fragile but powerful web of relationships in which we all exist. Religion says we are all children of God, made in His image and loved uniquely by Him for who we are (or some such version of that narrative). This attitude animates for the religious person all of his contacts with human society.

These *yearnings* – and that is what they are: yearnings or desires for love, for attention, for avoiding lonesomeness – are the kinds of psychological needs that get met by the social manifestations of religion – and indeed they are met not merely socially but also within the internal psychology of religion's genuine adherents. Now we are being told that, with the proper attention to what's *good* about religion, secularism can meet these needs just as well as religion used to – and without God besides.

The question is if these yearnings really are *needs*, or if that they are just yearnings we can do without if we are brave enough to truly abandon religion altogether. Religion and secular humanism agree that these are universal human needs. I want to suggest that validating those needs as we have been doing within the relatively narrow constraints of the theist/secular humanist debate is ultimately a *validation* of the old religious view of which these "needs" are really just a residue. And to achieve that goal of moving beyond them, I want to argue that psychologically and philosophically it really is possible to get beyond those needs towards a new cultural understanding of human agency. This is the future Nietzsche pointed towards – as we have seen with the Nietzschean objections to (1) transcendence as the solution to nihilism, and (2) the will to truth as the guiding light of atheist/secularist programs.

So how do we psychologically reject the *yearnings* for mattering, for frames of value beyond life, for loving, and for webs of relationships of which we form a part? As Nietzsche would exhort us to do, we can say yes to life as it is. Mattering in

the substantive sense of frames beyond life is a fantasy, is indeed a form of nihilism

as the first objection told us, insofar as it is a rejection of this world. But it isn't really

a *need* to fit our mattering into such frames. Substantive mattering (incorporating

transcendent frames of value) is *not the only kind of mattering*. As soon as we are

thrown into the world in the Heideggerian sense, we are never alone. We always are

already alongside others – we are always thrown into human relationships with

others. We don't have to *yearn* to matter – *because we already do*, and human life is

the quest to discover to whom we do matter in this sense. Even if we are absolute

orphans, that extremely rare case where we are bereft of any and all real human

ties, even then, as Heidegger tells us, we still matter to ourselves if to nobody else:

Dasein is "ontically distinguished by the fact that, in it very Being, that Being is an

issue for it" (Int., 1, §3). But even this concern for our own Being, important and

fundamental as that is, is still the barest form of mattering, since absolute

orphanhood is so rare: there are even thicker forms of mattering to others, to those

with whom we come in contact throughout our lives.

Remember that Dewey also saw the myriad human relationships as deeply

important – indeed, as forming part of the religious attitudes he wanted to preserve

(Cf. *A Common Faith*, lecture III, especially 70-72). And I agree with him (how could

one not?) that these relationships are fundamentally important. I just disagree that

they need be *religious* insofar as they constitute an attitude towards life. For the

religious attitudes, as we have seen, are always a *yearning* for the beyond, for

"something more," and we *do already matter* as beings in the world – both to

ourselves and to others. Our thrownness into a world of meaning and our mattering

in this inherent sense make the *yearning* for mattering and webs of relationships largely superfluous – these yearnings constitute an interpretation of real human feelings and anxieties about mattering and translate them into *desires* for transcendence when there is no need to make that move to transcendence. We always already matter; instead of yearning for mattering, we should say yes to the human condition of being an entity "which has to be as it is and as it can be," as Heidegger says. We should reject this creeping desire that we have inherited from our religious tradition to want something more beyond this condition of existing in a world of meaning and mattering. Indeed, in yearning for *more*, we are denying at least the importance of the mattering and meaning that we already have – and this is why transcendence constitutes a nihilistic, self-damaging denial in the Nietzschean sense.

When we say yes to life as it is, when we say yes to our thrownness, we abandon the yearnings for all things beyond life – for the transcendent, for frames of value, for mattering in a "substantive" sense – and we come to see the joy in our already being-in-the-world. This is something like the condition Nietzsche movingly described as "eternal recurrence" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The total acceptance of life as it is, the total acceptance of "this identical and selfsame life, in its greatest and smallest" (III, 13, ii), leads one to the overwhelming desire to live life over a thousand times: "—And must we not return and run in that other lane out before us, that long weird lane – must we not eternally return?" (III, 2, ii). Nietzsche describes how daunting and existentially frightening this prospect is, since life is after all small as well as great, *until* the yes-saying becomes fundamental, until our acceptance of

life is completely radical and fully self-endorsed: Zarathustra felt this anxiety when,
turning the thought of living life eternally over and over again in his mind, "he
waited for his misfortune the whole night: but he waited in vain. The night remained
clear and calm and happiness itself came closer and closer to him" (III, 3). This joy,
this "involuntary bliss," becomes total when Zarathustra exclaims, "For I love you, O
eternity!" (III, 16, vii). Eternal recurrence, then, is exactly the sort of psychological
state that refuses all transcendent yearnings, all the religious attitudes that seek
"something more," and instead situates us in a state of being-in-the-world that
accepts that state as it is – and indeed not only accepts our being, but *embraces* it as
something we would live forever.

Once we accept ourselves as thrown into *a world of meaning*, even if we don't
follow Zarathustra into total recurrence, then perhaps we can stop *yearning* for
meaning and say yes to the meanings that we have – perhaps then we can be truly
non-religious and without transcendent yearnings. It isn't that the yearnings haven't
in fact existed up until now (which might form part of some eliminativist position:
that these yearnings are a psychological illusion of some kind), nor that they do exist
and just need to be framed in a more modern and helpful and less archaic fashion
(which is part of the secular humanist position of adopting the yearnings for
refashioned purposes). This line of response to the religious attitudes says instead
that the yearnings have indeed existed – by dint of the religious tradition of
transcendence – and that they are grounded in real human feelings and anxieties
about our being beings thrown into the world – a daunting and profoundly anxiety-
inducing state of affairs, as Heidegger movingly describes. The problem has been

that our responses to those feelings have been wrong – they have been *false to life*. They have constructed transcendence rather than embracing the world; they have constructed yearnings for something more rather than acceptances of what already is; they have constructed elsewheres instead of appreciating heres. What we need to do is to say yes to our existence in the world, to our thrownness into a world of meaning and mattering.

But if we might take a step back for a moment, we might note that Taylor could reply to the historicist objection to his transcendental human agency (the objection that got us started down this path), by arguing that *if* it is indeed an historically inherited conception that humans yearn for contact with the transcendent good, as we have been suggesting it is, then it's *even so still impossible to leave behind*. Such a conception, he might say (and indeed Gordon anticipates this response – and finds it mostly unintelligible; Cf. 131-132), is *foundational* for our culture and is therefore not able to be rejected. This strategy of counterargument is a potent one to my argument about psychologically no longer needing the religious attitudes. The poor, the destitute, the lonely – these sectors of human global society (indeed, the great majority of humanity) may genuinely still need the psychological sustenance that religion provides them. Indeed, the upshot of Taylor's possible line of counterargument here might be that we are not spiritually ready for the kind of change being described here.

But my point is that this psychological shift away from transcendent yearnings *is nevertheless the way forward* – in contrast to the unabashed embrace of

transcendence of a Taylor, or to the shadowy refashioning of the yearnings of a Dewey or a Kitcher. It may be that what we need to accomplish this shift is first and foremost good old-fashioned progressive improvement of material conditions to hasten or make possible the psychological changes that we are talking about. (Something like this, by the way, is the hope of naturalistic pragmatists like Dewey and Rorty.) However, we also need to spiritually prepare ourselves for this shift away from transcendent yearnings – and for those of us lucky enough to live in the privileged West where the intellectual exercises necessary to make these dramatic internal spiritual changes are an open possibility for us, we need to be brave enough and honest enough to make the radical break with the religious past that I have been talking about.

But there is a powerful line of objection here, which, however, usefully sets up more details about just what the spiritual preparing alluded to above would look like. Just saying yes to life as it is, this line of objection warns, risks leading to a Stoical acceptance of the matterings into which we are thrown. In other words, radical yes-saying could dissuade us from *striving* toward the future, from *developing* commitments and projects that would make our lives *more* meaningful and more joyful than the ones into which we are just thrown, which, let's face it, are frequently neither of those things. How can we really *grow*, this objection worries, if we always just say yes to thrownness?

Back to Heidegger again: we are more than *just* thrown into the world; we are also beings who are oriented towards our future, who *project* our future

possibilities. For Heidegger in *Being and Time*, our place in the world is always defined in terms of what it is possible for us to be, of our possible ways of being: Dasein always "'knows' *what* it is capable of – that is, what its potentiality-for-Being is capable of" (I, 4, §31). We are beings who always project our future possibilities, which for us are ultimately constitutive: "As projecting, understanding is the kind of Being of Dasein in which it *is* its possibilities as possibilities"; Dasein then just "is its possibility" (I, 4, §31).

In attaining a joyful being-in-the-world, then, we must not be complacent yes-sayers who accept what we are thrown into just in virtue of that thrownness – for even though we are indeed beings who are thrown into a world of mattering and meaning, as we previously have said, we are also beings who strive to create a future *within* that world of meaning and mattering into which we are thrown, who project our future possibilities in the confines of that world. That process is a struggle, something as we shall see like that which Nietzsche described as "self-overcoming," but it is a process of *striving* for future possibilities that eschews transcendence in virtue of our thrownness. Projecting future possibilities in a world into which we are thrown is an *anti-transcendent project* because a fundamental aspect of it is our being-in-the-world, a view of being that has no place for, no vocabulary with which to possibly describe, a transcendent elsewhere. The whole struggle of projection, and the striving towards futures that make up that struggle, takes place *within the world* into which we are thrown. Think of *yearnings*, which I have argued we can and should do without, as reaching beyond the confines of this world; think of *strivings*, which we are talking about here in the context of

projection, as constructing futures within the frame of being-in-the-world. We can stop doing the former; we cannot and should not avoid the latter.

What does the projection of possibilities, the striving to construct a future, look like? I want to suggest three features here. First, again taking our cue from Heidegger, is the *care*, our engagement with our being, that defines us as human beings. Just as we are beings for whom our existence is an issue, we also hear "the call of care" (II, 2, §57) that is the conscience that draws us away from our obsession with the minutiae of life (what Heidegger calls the "present-at-hand") as well as the totalizing influence of others (the "they"), and instead attend to the fundamental being-in-the-world of ourselves and of others. We care, in other words, about our being, about ourselves, and about others who are important to us – hence Heidegger says that care is nothing less than constitutive of selfhood (II, 3, §64). And this caring is no static state of affairs, no mere acknowledgement of the fact of existence or anything like that; it is always tied up with our projection of future possibilities. So our concern for future projects and the commitments they entail encompasses our care for our own being and the being of those important to us.

The second feature of the struggle of projection and the striving to construct a future has to do with Nietzsche's notion of *self-overcoming*, an essential component of his will to power. When Nietzsche says that life always seeks to overcome itself, he means that life is always characterized by radical change, a fact that we must embrace and indeed harness. Speaking with the voice of life itself in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he says that, "I must be struggle and becoming and goal and

conflict and goals: ah, he who divines my will surely divines on what crooked paths it must tread!" (II, 12). The upshot then is that "unchanging good and evil – do not exist! From out of themselves they must overcome again and again"; the self-overcomer is one who "must be a destroyer and break values…And let everything break that is able to be broken by our truths! Many a house is still to be built!" (II, 12). The constant shifts and changes that self-overcoming entails means that there is no permanence, no absoluteness.

In a commentary on Nietzsche, Robert Pippin parses self-overcoming as leading for Nietzsche to "genuine freedom" (120); self-overcoming thus involves three elements. First is a "theory about the historical fragility of all human norms"; second is that the process itself "is quite complicated, full of dialectical, affirmation/negation flourishes"; and third is that there is "a psychological realization of the ineliminable need for self-overcoming…One cannot, as an act of will traditionally understood, will oneself into a state of knowledge or to desire something" (114-116). Self-overcoming in its essence, according to Pippin's reading of Nietzsche, is that "freedom [consists] in some sort of affirmative psychological relation to one's deeds, a relation of identification, finding oneself in one's deeds, experiencing them as genuinely one's own" (119). Nietzschean self-overcoming means, then, that in the quest for freedom, we must break with rigid absolutes and embrace radical and constant change. We must radically and psychologically embrace our ownership of our actions, which in self-overcoming always amount to "becoming and goal and conflict and goals," as Nietzsche says in *Zarathustra*. Self-

overcoming, we can say, is a constant engagement with shifting values and the conflicts that inhere in human life. It is, in essence, a process of constant growth.

The third feature of our concern for our future and the projection of possibilities that I want to highlight here is the notion of *generativity*, which comes from the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Generativity, as he described it, refers to "the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation" (138). This concern for future generations is cashed out in (1) "the meeting of bodies and minds [which] leads to a gradual expansion of ego-interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is being generated," and (2) in human institutions and organizations, which have "evolved together as an attempt to establish a set of proven methods and a fund of traditional reassurance which enables each generation to meet the needs of the next in relative independence from personal differences and changing conditions" (138-139).

So Erikson is saying that a crucial stage in the development of the life of a human being involves the sense of purpose and worth that derives from a profound concern for the future – the future of either your children (the "ego-interests and…libidinal investment"), or the future of humankind in a more general sense (manifested in "*all* institutions [which] by their very nature codify the ethics of generative succession," 139). More than caring about ourselves and our own interests and self-overcoming, more even than care for our immediate loved ones, through generativity we express care for our descendants.

Care, self-overcoming, and generativity amount to a wholehearted

commitment to engaging with and improving our own being-in-the-world, a striving

to construct a better life for ourselves within the world. After we embrace our

thrownness and see ourselves as embedded in a world where we always already

matter, we are left with the question of how to live a life in that world. To do so we

have to be concerned about our future possibilities, which we demonstrate through

those activities and psychological processes that we have just described. But an

advocate for transcendence could interject here and say, "You see, concern for

future possibilities, when cashed out in the generative concern for the future of

humankind, say, or even in caring for your loved ones, does demonstrate a certain

form of transcendence insofar as it is a frame of values beyond yourself." In other

words, projection of future possibilities, whenever it involves something beyond

myself, is *itself* a form of transcendence.

To this strong objection, I answer that if we are restricting our definition of

"transcendence," indeed of religious attitudes, to *anything* beyond my own narrow

self-interest and concerns, then my anti-transcendence project has already achieved

a kind of victory, for such a definition of transcendence is extremely impoverished

as compared with, for example, Taylor's robust "good beyond life." Once we start

restricting "transcendence" to *anything* beyond myself, then we aren't really talking

about transcendence anymore, but instead something closer to the kind of being-in-

the-world described by Nietzsche and Heidegger, who avoided otherworldly

transcendence altogether and who are therefore touchstones for me. My view of

joyful being-in-the-world absolutely and even necessarily involves concern for

things and persons beyond myself – but not for things beyond this world, which has traditionally been the purview of transcendence, making it my target here. Concern for this world absolutely must involve concern for my loved ones and indeed for future generations, because concern for this world has to involve its perpetuation and its improvement, otherwise the view risks the complacency and Stoicism I want to avoid.

But that project of improvement is not *transcendent* insofar as it resolutely restricts itself to the world as it is, which we say yes to by embracing our embeddedness in that world and our commitment to bettering it. The advocate for transcendence who abandons two-world metaphysics in favor of this-worldly commitments has in truth really stopped caring about transcendence altogether and started just caring about being-in-the-world. But we can, and indeed we must if we are really going to joyfully *embrace* this world, agree with the transcendence advocates that concern for frames beyond myself are of paramount importance. We just have to remind them that once they start deciding that otherworldly transcendence is less important than worldly being and the strivings that follow from it, they have started speaking our language of being-in-the-world.

We began by seeing the yearnings for transcendence as historically inherited aspects or residues of our religious past that we can view not as needs but as desires that we have been taught we need but which we do not. We do not need yearnings because we are always already thrown into a world where mattering and meaning exist and in which we are embedded and embodied. We can *say yes* to that world of

mattering and meaning, a world on its own terms without the yearning for transcendence, through our projection of future possibilities. We are radically concerned with our future in the world into which we have been thrown, and we engage with our strivings for our futures by *caring* about our being and the being of those who are important to us, by always engaging in *self-overcoming*, the radical and constant change that characterizes all human life and values, and by our investment in *generativity*, a concern for future generations of humans.

If we really are interested in an original and creative future beyond our religious past and the religious attitudes that continue to exist today, then equivalent replacement in the secular humanist mold just isn't enough. Radical yes-saying, the complete embrace of our being-in-the-world, is what we need to engage in to truly open ourselves up to genuinely new possibilities. To say yes to life, we must move from yearning for transcendence to striving for a human future in a human world. Saying yes to life means embracing our thrownness and displaying a vigorous and engaged concern for our future possibilities by caring about our being, by striving to overcome life as we know it and inherit it, and by making possible a future for future generations.

In contrast to the nihilism that characterizes the transcendence pathology, and in contrast to the wishy-washy middle ground of secular humanist equivalent replacement, saying yes to our being-in-the-world in the way I have just described can be described as truly *joyful* – or at least as able to possibly reach that eminent state. In thinking of being-in-the-world in this way, we focus our total attention on

our own growth as persons (our self-overcoming, our future commitments and projects) as well as the being of our loved ones (care, generative concern for our children and/or other future generations). This-worldliness of the sort represented by this mode of being is a constant, lifelong quest to appreciate the beauty of the world that we occupy and the miracle of our existence in it – and to increase that beauty by engaging with and improving the world as we know it *in the context solely of that world*. To focus so totally on life as it is and as it could be in this way implies, crucially, that the life we live is either already materially good enough or possibly could be good enough to sustain such an attention. It is no mystery why our ancestors, who lived shorter and harder lives than we could ever imagine, turned to transcendence, nor why many of those living today in conditions so radically less comfortable than ours in the modern West continue to turn to God. This mode of being-in-the-world is one that only the comfortable and privileged can dream of attaining. Those who have inherited that comfort should not shy away from radically and joyfully embracing, from saying yes to, the world that has been so kind to them.

Conclusion

This project can be read as a series of successive attempts to get to the most fundamental ethical issues in our culture, and I hope to have ended it with an account of the most fundamental way of doing things that I can plausibly offer. We began in Part I with Taylor and Williams and their critique of the morality system, comprised of paradigms like Kantianism and utilitarianism, which they argued, persuasively in my view, is an inaccurate and formalized way of looking at ethical life. So this first ethical project that we examined, by looking at powerful criticisms of it, looked hopelessly shallow. But in veering off from one another on the issue of what ethics should be doing in place of maintaining the morality system, Taylor and Williams were really disagreeing about the place of ethics in our culture. Williams wanted to keep things "realistic": whenever we can, we should describe the ethical in non-ethical terms. By not being exclusively philosophical, an enterprise about which he is deeply skeptical, we can be realistic. This thinned-out version of ethics has little to say about issues like politics and culture and is kept to humbler tasks like describing psychology. Such is Williams' version of naturalism.

Much of this project, especially Part II, has to do with critiquing Taylor's non-naturalism. Nevertheless, I argued that non-naturalism is a good way of interrogating issues of cultural import even though I disagreed with its conclusions on such issues. Non-naturalism constitutes, unlike naturalism, at least an attempt at a fundamental ethics in its emphasis on philosophy as an essential component of diagnosing the problems of modernity, an activity which is for Taylor profoundly

connected to his account of transcendental human agency, wherein we strongly evaluate on the basis of ideals which are good for us to love. Anything that denies us connection to transcendent goods is an unhealthy foundation for our culture and its goals of universal human rights and the acknowledgement of dignity, according to Taylor, and in offering a full portrait not only of human agency but also of the foundations of our culture, he succeeds at attempting a fundamental ethics.

But in so profoundly privileging transcendence, I judged Taylor to be guilty of a latent nihilism, an unexpressed but profound dissatisfaction with the world that we have and live in manifested by desiring for contact with a world beyond. I critiqued this view, as well as the non-naturalist definition of nihilism as constituting this denial of contact with the transcendent, as themselves forms of nihilism. As I said in the Introduction, my vision of fundamental ethics, in direct contrast with Taylor's, includes the view that problems have to be solved solely in the context of this world and without recourse to the transcendent. On this basis I also criticized secular humanism as a strategy of the equivalent replacement of religion with the same old so-called religious attitudes now couched in secularist terms. This strategy also failed to go far enough in embracing this world, settling for the old yearnings of the religious form of life, simply updated for modernity.

So after criticizing the morality system for being too abstract and proceduralist an account of ethical life, Williams' naturalism for being too thin an approach to get to fundamental problems in our culture, and Taylor's non-naturalism for nihilistically yearning for transcendence, I arrived at what I hope to

be a more fundamental approach to ethical life, what I call joyful being-in-the-world. I take this view to be the antidote for transcendental nihilism because it is as total an embrace of the world as possible without being a complacent acceptance of it. Thrown into a world of meaning and mattering, we have to strive to make better lives for ourselves within that world by caring about the being of ourselves and our loved ones, by embracing the constant change that characterizes our attempts at self-overcoming, and by displaying concern for successive generations. Thus do we show our love for the world that has been kind to us (and by us I mean, as I said at the end of chapter II E, those of us living in the contemporary West who have the requisite level of comfort and education to move beyond religion), and we can only do that by so radically embracing the world that we forget the need for transcendence that we once thought we had.

Coming to terms with the world in the way just described represents, in my own view, the greatest joy possible in human life. Such a mode of being puts our lives as they are and our relationships and connections front and center without the distracting transcendental yearnings that I think we should strive to rid ourselves of. Thus can we say yes to life without merely accepting life, which is frequently unsatisfying on the face of it. Joyful being-in-the-world embraces the world but beckons us to improve the world into which we are thrown. This mode of being calls us to love and embrace the world – and to engage meaningfully with it, to make it better for ourselves, our loved ones, and those who come after us. As long as we are gazing at the transcendent, we can never attain this kind of joyful engagement with the world that we have and where we always already matter and have meaning.

I distinguish my vision of joyful being-in-the-world from secular humanism by arguing that the latter view retains aspects of the religious form of life and seeks to retain those aspects, those yearnings, in a secularist context, as we saw in my discussion of Dewey and Kitcher and the religious attitudes. The total this-worldliness of my own view avoids this trap, and by rejecting yearnings but continuing to strive, joyful being-in-the-world represents a genuine alternative to both theism and secular humanism in its utter rejection of any form of truth-worship. Secular humanism retains this fixation by either (a) rationally "disproving" the existence of God and replacing God with science, or (b) by accepting, somehow, the truth of religious attitudes in its stubborn insistence that we retain them.[16]

But it took getting to an examination of non-naturalism to see that there may be a problem of nihilism in the first place (a possibility to which the morality system and naturalism are not even alive). But non-naturalism's alignment of the cure for nihilism with transcendence was cause for my disagreement with it, and from there I arrived at my vision of joyful being-in-the-world. This dialectic says something important, I think, about the relationship between ethics and human life. The whole basis for my use of non-naturalism rather than naturalism as a springboard for Part II was that non-naturalism attempted to wrestle with issues like nihilism. Even though I think that non-naturalism's approach to that problem is profoundly wrong,

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[16] What of the communal and social aspects of religion that secular humanism wants to keep, discussed for example by Dewey in *A Common Faith*? What does joyful being-in-the-world say about that aspect of religiosity? Nothing. Joyful being-in-the-world is a private and personal form of life that requires certain experiences and attitudes to attain. It cannot be socially ordered. But it nevertheless implies a profound love of the world, and that love means improving that world. That loving attitude will no doubt imply that certain actions must be taken to make the world a better place. Such a view will thus no doubt have political and social implications.

ethics should indeed be asking the sorts of questions that non-naturalism asks. Our culture requires it.

It seems to me that Williams was wrong to say that philosophy has nothing to offer in the way of answers to political and cultural problems. Joyful being-in-the-world says something important, I think, about nihilism – it identifies what it is and how we can avoid it. If we live our lives the way joyful being-in-the-world describes being, as engaged with the world in an active and loving way, then we can actually improve the conditions our spiritual lives. We can arrive at an acceptance of the world as it is and as we know it. We can say yes to life and we can strive to create better lives for our loved ones and ourselves.

This is the project of self-improvement and spiritual health that I picked up from Taylor, even though our approaches to those issues couldn't be any more different. We can avoid the feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness that are the provenance of nihilism by engaging in the kind of philosophical introspection that results in the kind of life that joyful being-in-the-world calls us to lead. In that respect, then, philosophy has an important role in the health of our culture. It calls us to question where meaning comes from, and how we can make our lives better. In the case of my approach to fundamental ethics, philosophy calls us to embrace the world as it is. In examining these issues, this is the upshot I'm left with about the importance of philosophy and ethics for our spiritual wellbeing.

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