Charles Taylor and Ethical Naturalism

One of the most striking, and strikingly familiar, features of the philosophy of Charles Taylor is his consistency in trying to avoid overly reductivist accounts of human life and action and instead do justice to the phenomenology, as it were. So much of his effort, as he says himself at the very beginning of his first two volumes of collected papers, is to argue against an understanding of human life and action which is modelled on the natural sciences.[1]

This effort has been front and centre in Taylor's reflections on morality, as contained in several articles and in *Sources of the Self,* especially the first four chapters. Taylor has consistently sought to defend and argue for an understanding of moral agency which is richer than what he feels is implicit in mainstream "procedural moral theories", as he calls them, such as Kantian deontology or utilitarianism. The moral phenomenology which he has sought to work out and which he believes is hidden or ignored by these normative theories is also aimed at meta-ethical theories such as emotivism or quasi-realism and at scientific reductivist accounts which attempt to dispense with or move us beyond the familiar language of morality altogether. The whole apparatus of strong evaluations, goods, hypergoods, constitutive goods, and moral sources laid out in the first four chapters of *Sources of the Self* seeks to uncover how human beings *actually* make sense of their lives, what a genuine moral phenomenology should look like. Taylor's defence of this phenomenology in the face of a sceptical naturalist who sees it as mere projection on to a neutral physical world is, in a word, that it is inescapable.

For the purposes of the present paper, I will not initially delve into the specifics of this phenomenology directly. Rather, I am going to assume a familiarity with it and turn instead to the most recent of Taylor's published reflections on this subject, contained in a little-known paper entitled, "Ethics and Ontology", published in 2003 in *The Journal of Philosophy*. This paper raises the issue of naturalism in a way that sees Taylor moving beyond the discussion in *Sources of the Self* and engaging with two thinkers he finds sympathetic to his own objectives, namely, John McDowell and David Wiggins. But I want to contend that Taylor does not fully appreciate just how congenial they are to his

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[1] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 1ff.

objectives. For they defend a view of ethical naturalism he should applaud. I will address this first. I will then turn to aspects of Taylor's moral phenomenology which seem to pose a threat to ethical naturalism—in particular, his conceptions of "the incommensurably higher", constitutive goods, and moral sources—and try to show how this need not be the case. Underlying the entire discussion is the question of how best we are to conceive what we may mean by "naturalism".

Two kinds of naturalism

As already mentioned, Charles Taylor has consistently opposed attempts to explain the human world in reductivist natural scientific terms. In "Ethics and Ontology", his central concern is to understand how an ethical or moral phenomenology that does justice to how human beings make actual ethical sense of their own and others' lives can be squared with a naturalist ontology. Taylor makes clear that a "naturalist ontology" for him is one which explains things in the terms of post-Galilean natural science which entails a view of the universe as "devoid of meaning and value" (EO, 306).[2] This is the same understanding of naturalism Taylor targets in *Sources of the Self*.

Now in "Ethics and Ontology", Taylor turns primarily to the writings of John McDowell, and, to a lesser extent, David Wiggins. He rightly finds in these two authors an approach to ethics that is motivated by intuitions similar to those contained in his own work. They do justice to the moral phenomenology, unlike emotivists and quasi-realists. But one of the refreshingly liberating aspects of McDowell's approach, which is arguably also true of Wiggins's, is the innovative understanding of naturalism that they propose and which allows for the kind of reconciliation between the moral phenomenology and a naturalist ontology, between ethics and ontology, that Taylor seems to pass over and which he should in fact applaud. Let me try to flesh this out.

A good place to start is with the notion of values. Both McDowell and Wiggins defend an approach to values that construes our perception of them as analogous to our perception of colours. If we were to say that our experience of seeing the colour 'red' should really be explained in terms of the primary qualities of the object we are looking

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[2] Charles Taylor, "Ethics and Ontology", *Journal of Philosophy*, 2003, 100 (6), 305-320. This text will be referenced above by the abbreviation EO.

at, its microscopic structure, say, then we are, quite simply, no longer explaining the experience itself, as it is *subjectively* experienced. Secondary qualities such as colours, therefore, *do* have objective reality. While they depend on beings like us to be seen, as long as *we* exist, they exist for us and independently of us. We, as it were, each subjectively experience them objectively, under favourable circumstances (the right lighting, etc.).

McDowell and Wiggins construe values as having an analogous reality, as Taylor observes in his article. Values are not arbitrarily subjective. As Taylor puts it, when I feel a sense of nausea, whatever object it is that causes my nausea is, for me, nauseous. But when it comes to values, my ascription of a value-property to an action or person, while depending on my subjective experience and judgement, can also be criticized and the question as to whether the action or person merits the value-property-ascription can be asked. While values are subjectively experienced, they also have an objectivity to them in so far as we can ask whether someone really is honest or whether that action really was generous. More basically, their objectivity derives from the fact that human beings in a society can perceive the properties of actions or characters in a manner analogous to how they perceive colours. While our sharing the same basic visual perceptual apparatus is the condition of our shared colour perception, an analogous case can be made for the genesis of our shared capacity for value-perception. McDowell and Wiggins provide accounts of this genesis which are similar in important respects. While it is certainly more central to McDowell's account, both of them, for example, argue for a naturalistic understanding of this account of the phenomenology of value experience that resists the reductivist terms of what Taylor calls post-Galilean science.

McDowell lays out his candidate for a different understanding of naturalism in *Mind and World* and in his paper "Two Sorts of Naturalism".[3] His objective is to show how human beings' developed ethical (and conceptual) capacities should not have to be explained in the terms of Taylor's post-Galilean science. It is simply erroneous to believe that conceptual monism must prevail, and that natural scientific truth is the only truth

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[3] John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994; "Two Sorts of Naturalism", *Mind, Value, Reality*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, 167-197. Both texts are referenced above, respectively, by the abbreviations *MW* and TSN.

there is.[4] Human beings are natural beings and our ethical and conceptual capacities must be seen as ways of actualizing ourselves as animals (*MW*, 78). In the ethical dimension, our upbringings entail the shaping of our motivational and evaluative propensities such that we come to develop a second nature on the basis of which we become capable of assessing actions and characters and ascribing value-properties to them (TN, 184ff.). For the most part, our ethical action and deliberation occurs in a manner that is non-codifiable, according to McDowell. On the Aristotelian model, if our second nature is one of virtue, then we acquire a complex ethical sensitivity that involves possessing an understanding of all the virtues. And when we determine how to act, the major premise in our practical syllogism, as it were, is not any particular moral rule but rather our conception of the sort of person one should be or of how to live.[5] Assuming all in the community share this second nature of virtue, we can count on there being shared ways of perceiving and responding to values in the actions and characters of the members of that community. This amounts to a logos of the practical and is the basis of ethical objectivity.

Now Taylor does acknowledge that McDowell challenges the ontology associated with the post-Galilean model and that he argues that we must understand the human world on its own terms. Taylor sees McDowell as claiming that with the existence of human beings comes a "whole flock of subjective properties, thick and strong evaluations which needs to be understood on its own terms and which cannot be made transparent to Galilean science" (EO, 312). He even claims that "McDowell seems to have done the trick, and to have reconciled the deliverances of phenomenology and the basic concerns of a naturalistic ontology, which cannot allow [ethical] values into the furniture of the universe" (EO, 314). But it seems that what Taylor is saying is simply that McDowell has defended the indispensability of such a phenomenology to our accurate and adequate self-understandings. This is a point Taylor himself had made in *Sources of the Self* when he said, "What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices. […] What you can't help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get a grasp of at present" (*SS*, 59).[6] Taylor construes

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[4] John McDowell, "Précis of *Mind and world*". *Philosophical issues* 7, 238.
[5] John McDowell, "Virtue and reason", *Mind, Value, Reality*, 53ff.
[6] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. This text is referenced above by the abbreviation *SS*.

McDowell as bravely arguing for this in defiance of a post-Galilean naturalist ontology. What we have seen, however, is that McDowell precisely challenges this ontology. What Taylor doesn't discuss is McDowell's proposal for a revised naturalism which accommodates second nature and rejects a conception of naturalism that equates nature with what the natural sciences aims to make comprehensible. It is precisely this way of grounding moral phenomenology that I think advances Taylor's agenda in a novel way.

Wiggins has a similar way of accounting for our shared capacity for value-perception which he discusses in "A Sensible Subjectivism" and "Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs".[7] Analogously to McDowell's "shaping of motivational and evaluative propensities", Wiggins shows how a historical social process can lead to the establishment of shared moral responses to intersubjectively discernible features that engage our sentiments or feelings. This process "creates a form of life that invests certain features of people, acts and situations with the status of values" (MC, 79). In growing up within such a form of life, Wiggins says, our original participation in a general way of feeling and of being motivated leads to us *finding* or *discovering* that X deserves such and such a response, or has such and such a value. Wiggins also defends this moral phenomenology by arguing for its naturalist credentials along Humean but avowedly cognitivist lines—he claims Hume has never deserved the hostility of moral cognitivists. Wiggins argues, in agreement with Taylor, that if value properties are not replaceable by physicalistic/scientific explanations, then they *are* making a difference. He goes on to claim that value properties reveal how human beings respond not only to natural features of the world, but "to features that mind itself, as it has taken on a life of its own, has marked out there. Value properties are properties that mind critically delimits and demarcates in the world" (MC, 84). If these properties are indispensable and irreducible, Wiggins concludes, "this is surely what it is for consciousness not merely to arrive in the natural world, but for it to make itself at home there. By critically determining the presence there of valuational properties, we colonize that natural world" (MC, 84).

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[7] David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism", *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 185-214; "Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 91 (1990-1991), 61-85. Both articles are referenced above, respectively, by the abbreviations SS and MC.

This grounding of moral phenomenology in human nature and historical social processes is Wiggins' own version of ethical naturalism that rejects any post-Galilean scientific view of nature—something Wiggins explicitly does on several occasions—in favour of a Humean naturalistic view which "treats human morality as a certain sort of natural phenomenon, a phenomenon of feeling" (MC, 68). McDowell and Wiggins, in a word, broadly agree with Taylor on the structure of the moral phenomenology which has to be accepted; but they go *further* and try to provide a genetic, naturalist account of it on the basis of a broader understanding of 'naturalism'. Taylor even says in his article that a consequence of their accounts is that we "either abandon naturalism or adopt a more sophisticated variant" (EO, 316). My point has simply been to highlight that "a more sophisticated naturalism" should in fact be seen as a constitutive element of their accounts.

Reconciling phenomenology and naturalism

I want now to turn to a few ways in which the ethical naturalism of McDowell and Wiggins appears unable to accommodate Taylor's account of moral phenomenology for the simple reason that his account includes more elements/structures than they seem to allow for. This brings us to the central point of "Ethics and Ontology". Taylor states that he is convinced by McDowell's and Wiggins's accounts, which, he says, show that "our lives are unintelligible if we try to sideline the human world" (EO, 315). As we have seen, but formulating the point a little differently, he feels they have successfully shown that enculturated socialized humans cannot but take as real and objective the web of interrelated values they perceive and use to make sense of their lives analogously to how secondary properties such as colour are real and objective for us (with the proviso that this of course does not mean values are immune to critique—although, as McDowell says, any critique is immanent, like Neurath's boat at sea, which can only be completely rebuilt plank by plank at best (TN, 189)). But this agreement notwithstanding, Taylor writes, "I am sorry to trouble a hard-won peace, but it seems to me that there remains an issue here. Some sources of the temptation to undercut the phenomenology of moral life in the name of a post-Galilean "naturalism" have been perhaps laid to rest, but others remain. […] We have not discharged our entire debt to phenomenology once we have laid the ghost of

[micro]reductionism to rest. There remains the tension between the phenomenology of the incommensurably higher and a naturalist ontology which has difficulty finding a place for this" (EO, 314, 316).

What I take Taylor to be saying here is that the values whose irreducibility and indispensability McDowell and Wiggins have successfully demonstrated relate to *social* values like generosity, honesty, kindness, and, as he notes in the case of Wiggins, the funny. These are values which relate to human beings in societies interacting and getting along well together. In this respect, a naturalist ontology can account for most of them in evolutionary terms as serving important survival purposes. These are values that Taylor associates with what in *A Secular Age* he calls "the order of mutual benefit central to exclusive humanism" which depends on the discovery or definition of intra-human sources of benevolence. Taylor links this to attempts in the 18th century to ground morality in human sentiments and Hume's tracing of virtues to utility (*SA*, 256, 258).[8]

Now what is missing from this kind of view of values is what Taylor captures with the expression "the phenomenology of the incommensurably higher". Taylor often uses the example of the Aristotelian *to kallon*, or the noble, to capture one sense of what he means here. A full account of our moral phenomenology can not just consist of social values and virtues rooted in mutual sympathy and utility. Human beings are also sensitive in their moral lives to higher values like the noble as a source of motivation. And these kinds of values are not obviously amenable to a standard naturalist evolutionary account of morality, Taylor notes. The immediate response to this from the McDowell/Wiggins camp is that their model *can* account for this. Let me focus on Wiggins, who would clearly be most sensitive to this kind of criticism, given his desire to defend a Humean cognitivism. Wiggins says that even if moral sensibility has its first origin in primitive benevolence, in a primitive system of boo and hurray, "what we have now seems to have transcended its simple origin countless times over" and our responses are now clearly cognitive (MC, 70). Wiggins tries to show how our pairs of value properties and responses develop and generate new ones until we have a whole system of properties and responses which take on a life of their own. There is no reason in principle why the

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[8] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. This text is referenced above by the abbreviation *SA*.

higher values Taylor speaks of should not be able to emerge in this process of cultural evolution. In "Ethics and Ontology", Taylor in fact suggests this emergence of higher values as a possibility that both McDowell and Wiggins may envision, given precisely Wiggin's genetic account of the funny. He hastens to add, however, that even if this is the case, "emergence in this sense puts a severe crimp in the standard naturalism of today's dominant evolutionary theories" (EO, 319). Again, I think we should see both McDowell and Wiggins as simply rejecting the kind of naturalism Taylor is thinking of here. Not only can values not be reduced to primary qualities or neurophysiology, they also can not be reduced to utility or evolutionary imperatives. For McDowell, our ethical capacities, just like our conceptual capacities, *qua* second nature, are part of our actualization as organisms, as the kinds of animals we are, and in this our ethical and conceptual capacities are both essentially natural and each have a *logos* of their own that is irreducible. Wiggins makes the same kind of analogy: moral sensibility may have originated in a primitive system of responses of boo and hurray, just as the language of consciousness is sometimes supposed to have originated in "the verbalization of reactions of striving towards things (ooh) or away from them (ouch)" – in each case, there is a development that follows that far transcends the simple origin (MC, 70). They each take on a life of their own and become straightforwardly cognitive, in the moral case our response being to an "intersubjectively discernible feature that engages with sentiment" (MC, 70). Both McDowell and Wiggins argue for the integrity of the ethical or moral not just as something we can not do without in making sense of our lives, but as something as natural to us as our capacity for language or reason. This is why they would reject Taylor's claim that the "emergence of higher values" must put a crimp in *their* ethical naturalism.

Here, however, we come to where Taylor would in fact seem to part ways with McDowell and Wiggins. For even if Taylor does agree with their ethical naturalism, there is still a crucial aspect of the phenomenology of the incommensurably higher that remains unaccounted for. It is a significant step, which Taylor applauds, to demonstrate the irreducibility and indispensability of values and our moral phenomenology as McDowell and Wiggins have done. But showing how our evaluational and motivational propensities are shaped in upbringing and how this is constitutive of our very existence as

ethical agents who thereby acquire the web of interrelated values (norms, behaviours, goods) through which we make sense of actions and lives is not the whole story. For this only explains the *genesis* of our nature as ethical creatures. What is missing from this account of the phenomenology is how *articulacy* is a crucial part of it. It is one thing to have a pre-reflective sense of what is generous or noble or even to possess a reflective concept of what is generous or noble. Equipped with this sensitivity, I am able to perceive actions which are generous or noble, analogously to how I can perceive objects as red. But for Taylor my *full* sense of the generous and the noble or of my commitment to human rights is quite another thing, requiring *articulacy* about the point behind these values, what gives them their meaning and power for me, what explains or grounds *why* they matter to me, why they *move* me, e.g., in the case of human rights, why humans are worthy of respect.

We see here how Taylor's conception of moral phenomenology starts to move beyond what we find in McDowell and Wiggins. Articulacy about the point behind the values we were raised with and subscribe to as adolescents and adults is a crucial aspect of this phenomenology for Taylor. But whether articulated by us or not, this "ontological account" (*SS*, 8) is always there—we have some sense of *why* we should respect human rights or value generous action: human beings *deserve* such respect because they are capable of rationality, they possess inherent dignity, etc. These ontological questions underlying the web of values we are raised into are always there for all of us and are part of our moral phenomenology; how and whether we answer them shapes our moral lives. Trying to articulate answers can have a profound impact on my attitude towards these values. For example, from having a merely pre-reflective sense of these values based on my upbringing, articulacy can motivate, move, and empower me in a way that I become consciously committed to pursuing and promoting them. Articulacy about the ontological account underlying and grounding the web of values, however, can be fully accepted by an ethical naturalist, e.g., if one's account has to do with the specialness and dignity of rational nature as articulated by Kant—in Taylor's terminology, this is an example of a constitutive good, a good which underlies and makes sense of all the other goods and values we find meaningful in human life. While not strictly essential to moral agency,

articulacy can certainly be seen as a natural aspect of it, at least in as much as language is natural to human beings.

It is thus possible to imagine how the "incommensurably higher" and articulacy about ontological accounts can be plausibly accommodated within ethical naturalism. But for Taylor this is not the whole story. Ontological accounts which refer to human dignity and rational agency both operate within what he calls the "immanent frame", according to which we understand the universe through the natural order that is immanent in it, which we are able to read off it, as it were (*SA*, 542). Tracing the rise of this immanent frame is one of the main objectives of *A Secular Age*, where Taylor defines religion in Western experience as relating to the transcendent, as opposed to the merely immanent (*SA*, 16). The latter involves not just a naturalistic account of the universe, but also ontological accounts and constitutive goods which derive from "within", that is, which locate what grounds our web of values in human nature itself (e.g., Kantian rational agency) as opposed to in something external and transcendent, such as the Platonic Idea of the Good or a belief in God.

This is where the strains between Taylor's account of our moral phenomenology and ethical naturalism are greatest. The ethical naturalist account provides a description that remains, for Taylor, squarely within the "immanent frame". Even if it can make room for ontological accounts, these remain within the terms of what Taylor calls "modern exclusive secular humanism" which, by definition, eschews any relation to anything external and transcendent. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor provides what he calls "a phenomenology of moral/spiritual experience" (*SA*, 780), a crucial aspect of which is the notion of "fullness", which involves our relation to and articulacy about ontological accounts and constitutive goods. Articulacy even within the limits of exclusive humanism brings with it a certain kind of "fullness" or moral empowerment that is important to a full-blooded or robust moral agency. Taylor's conception of moral phenomenology goes even further: an individual's capacity to rise to and experience the greatest "fullness" she is capable of involves some relation to the transcendent and this in turn can undergird a commitment to the highest moral aspirations. Common to all the structures/elements (e.g., ontological accounts, constitutive goods) that Taylor adds to the moral phenomenology we find in McDowell and Wiggins is the fact that none of them are strictly *essential* to

moral agency; one can be a moral agent without them. But none of them are, for that reason, any less natural. Taylor is not only interested in what is essential to moral agency. He wants to understand what the most robust form of it, the "fullness" a human being can achieve, requires. And on *this* level, ontological accounts and constitutive goods *are*, according to Taylor, essential and natural.

But Taylor goes beyond this claim, which can plausibly be squared with ethical naturalism, and implies that a relation to the transcendent is essential to the highest level of "fullness". Why isn't a constitutive good within the framework of what Taylor calls modern exclusive secular humanism, e.g., one based on the dignity of human beings, sufficient? Taylor's argument here centres on the role the reciprocity of love, or lack thereof, plays in moral action and identity. A purely secular humanist ethic committed to universal benevolence, justice, etc., when it encounters obstacles to its realization— which will abound in the real messy world of humanity, such as less than morally enlightened people standing in the way or objects of that benevolence or justice who are ungrateful—can lead to mutilation and degenerate into fanaticism (*SS*, 516ff.; *SA*, 695ff.). Taylor acknowledges that this can also happen and certainly has happened in the case of a religiously inspired ethic. It is thus not just a question of "having the right beliefs" (*SA*, 697, 701), but rather of having a certain relationship to a transcendent constitutive good and moral source, and this is where the reciprocity of love is key. Taylor frankly admits the admirability and even possible superiority of a secular ethics which is motivated by no hope of reward (such as the "restored life of the Resurrection" which a Christian martyr may hope for) and which persists in the face of a meaningless universe, the example he gives here being of Dr. Rieux in Albert Camus' *La Peste* (*SA*, 702). He asks, however, whether this is in fact the "highest good" human beings can attain, whether the "heroism of gratuitous giving [that] has no place for reciprocity" is what human life is really about (ibid.). Just as in our most basic experiences of life, of the bond of love between parent and child, perhaps the highest good consists in "communion, mutual giving and receiving" (ibid.).

Here, fascinatingly, Taylor's ethical naturalism seems to meet up with his conviction on the need for a transcendent moral source. In a word, just as an individual's commitment to her child is based on the bond of reciprocal love, so too must our highest

and most abstract universal moral commitments be grounded in a relationship of reciprocal love if we are to achieve the highest form of "fullness" and have a moral source adequate to them. The relationship at this level is between human beings and a God who has love, *agape*, for them, who can provide "a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided" (*SS*, 521). Having this kind of moral source, and this kind of understanding and relationship to it, Taylor believes, also protects one from the slide to mutilation. Such a relationship to a transcendent moral source is an element, the highest, in a complete account of our moral phenomenology. Among the many questions that this raises, I will ask just one. Does Taylor believe that the relationship to the transcendent as a structure in the phenomenology of the moral/spiritual can be accounted for or reconciled with ethical naturalism, along the same lines as I have suggested one can reconcile other elements in his broader moral phenomenology? Of course, as already stated, such an ethical naturalism would not be confined to what is basically essential to moral agency, but would rather try to capture what is necessary for the most robust kind of moral agency human beings are capable of. Another way of asking this question would be: is the basis for the connection Taylor sees between the relationship to the transcendent, on the one hand, and morality and our moral phenomenology, on the other, to be located in his understanding of our moral phenomenology as naturally pointing to the need for a transcendent moral source based on the centrality of relationships of reciprocal love to robust moral agency and identity? Or is the basis to be found in his own religious convictions, and a world view according to which all that can and should, on one level, be seen as naturalistically unfolding is, on another, but an expression of a divine order which also envelops it and provides it with its ultimate meaning and grounding? I suspect that for Taylor the answer to *both* these questions is yes. If this is true, then one upshot is that those who do not have a religious faith but might agree with the naturalistic argument for a relationship to the transcendent as a structure of our moral/spiritual phenomenology are consigned to living lives they know can never attain maximum "fullness".