6 Strong Evaluations
Charles Taylor

First published in 1989, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* makes for genuinely impressive reading. Its ambition is apparent in that it can equally be read as philosophical history of Western society and culture, a critical assessment of mainstream modern social and political thought, and an account of the various intellectual trends and traditions that have contributed to the rise of the modern idea of the self. But *Sources* is also the articulation of an original philosophical and normative position about the relationships between self, identity and morality in modernity. This last plane is the one on which I should like to concentrate in this Chapter: Taylor's discussion of the rise and main features of the modern self makes it possible to read this book as a significant milestone in the twentieth-century tradition of philosophical anthropology.

Apart from its possible contribution to modern notions of the human and humanity, reading *Sources* as a work in philosophical anthropology can be justified on two grounds. In terms of content, first, there is an ambivalence in Taylor's usage of ideas of 'the human' that is highly instructive for the challenges faced by my project of philosophical sociology: does one retain the notion of 'the human' as a generic term with the help of which we refer to the broadest features of our species, or should one rather adopt modern, more technical, social scientific notions such as 'identity' and 'self'? Either option comes with costs: ideas of the human seem ill-prepared to handle not only their own original religious roots but they also seem to betray the thick cultural and ethical descriptions that Taylor's arguments demand. For their part, concepts of the self are, more often than not, built precisely on the kind of epistemological assumptions that Taylor criticises; above all, they presuppose the 'punctual' or disengaged individual that is arguably the major mythical construction of modern philosophy that Taylor seeks to undermine. Second, *Sources* can also be interpreted as a work in philosophical anthropology in terms of style, as it seeks to integrate current developments in various intellectual fields – metaphysics, epistemology, social theory, social psychology, moral philosophy and cultural and literary theory – in order to account for

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the constitutive experiences of modern life. His is not a technical book in any of these fields and yet it seeks to uphold their various standards of justification and up-to-date knowledge: this 'eclecticism' in seeking to combine philosophical and scientific traditions, in order to jointly offer descriptive and normative arguments, is again a trademark of philosophical anthropology as an intellectual tradition. Whether we agree with his general approach or not, therefore, Taylor's reconstruction of the rise of the modern self is explicitly connected to the kind of presuppositions about the human that are central to my idea of philosophical sociology: the relationships between the individual and the collective, between particularity and universality and the normative articulation of ideas of the good.[1] I will not discuss Taylor's overall intellectual project in these pages. Rather, as I unpack the various components of Taylor's philosophical anthropology, I shall pay special attention to his understanding of universalism and his critique of modern proceduralism as they play a special role in what I take to be his major contribution to our purposes – the idea of strong evaluations. These are constituted in the intersections between self, identity and morality itself.

I

Taylor defines strong evaluations as the 'background of distinctions between things which are recognised as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value' (1985a: 3). Strong evaluations are the constitutive anthropological feature that allows Taylor to delineate 'normal human agency . . . what is distinctively human is the power to *evaluate* our desires' (1985a: 3, 15–16). Strong evaluations give shape to who we are as human beings as generic members of a species: 'the human beings we are and live with are all strong evaluators' (1985a: 28). But strong evaluations are equally relevant in our constitution as unique individuals whose particular sense of self is defined by the *content* of those evaluations: 'our identity is defined by our fundamental evaluations . . . the concept of identity is bound up with that of certain strong evaluations which are inseparable from myself' (1985a: 34). Strong evaluations require, indeed help create, the very language with which persons express what they regard as 'higher and lower, noble and base, courageous and cowardly, integrated and fragmented' (1985a: 24).

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[1] Earlier on, Taylor (1985a: 1) himself used the idea of philosophical anthropology as a way of describing his reflections on human nature. In *Sources*, however, Taylor (1989: 7) opens with a reservation against the naturalistic bias of traditional conceptions of human nature in philosophical anthropology. See Laitinen (2008) for a detailed account of Taylor's arguments from the standpoint of philosophical anthropology.

At the same time, the very notion of a *strong* evaluation points to the need for distinguishing it from the interests and desires of the 'simple weigher' (1985a: 25). These *weak* preferences lack the reflexivity, articulacy and depth that allow strong evaluations to define 'the kind of beings we are or want to be' (1985a: 26). Taylor does not mince his words here:

> the strong evaluator has articulacy and depth which the simpler weigher lacks. He has, one might say, articulacy about depth … Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy of preferences, but also about the quality of life, the kind of beings we are or want to be. It is in this sense deeper. (1985a: 26)

A central proposition in Taylor's work is, therefore, that the modern self is constituted through strong normative evaluations. Our sense of who we are not only depends on but is primarily articulated around those issues that deeply matter to us; and they matter not as a result of whimsical preference or the satisfaction of hedonistic desire as it would be the case with *homo oeconomicus*. The accreditation of how central *moral* motifs are for modern identity is based on the proposition that these evaluations, although they are not 'objective' in the conventional, scientific, sense of the word, they do have 'an independent existence' in the world (1989: 20). Moral evaluations have to be recognised as such by subjects themselves, but they do not emerge from subjective valuations; indeed, they are conceived precisely in contradistinction to the 'colourless subjectivistic talk of "values" that is prevalent in modern societies' (1989: 507). Taylor contends that modern ideas of normativity involve *values* as a way of conveying our subjective or particular *experiences* of the good: it is difficult to talk about morality or the normative without a reference to values. But to speak only of *subjective values* has become a contradiction in terms because objects of value do not depend only on subjective preferences; instead, they refer also to things in the world that are prior to, and exist independently from, subjective identification. Against its own self-conception, therefore, the modern self becomes only possible because of a pre-existing external world of moral goods.[2]

As we will discuss below, Taylor's position is critical of modern rationalism without being irrationalist; it is a form of ethical *realism* that however does not depend on a purely cognitivist approach to the

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[2] We have also discussed these arguments in Chapters 2 and 4 and we are reminded here of Leo Strauss's critique of Max Weber's thesis that the problem of normative uncertainty in modernity is a question of the polytheism of *values*. In Strauss's critique, the aporia of Weber's thinking lies in the fact that he had to simultaneously presuppose the rationality of knowledge *and* the irrationality of normative values. But this only holds if we stick to a narrow, subjectivist view of values themselves. See Strauss (1974: 35–80) and Chernilo (2013a: 51–9) for further discussion. See Kerr (2004) for further discussion of Taylor's notion of the good.

moral universe.[3] It is also the case that, as it happens with most realist positions, Taylor equally has to face the charge of possible reification. In particular, the challenge is whether and how his position can avoid a return to metaphysical conceptions of the good. But instead of going on the defensive, Taylor's work boldly advances his own critique of modern philosophy on the grounds that it lacks a *consistent moral ontology* (1989: 10). We require a redefinition of the modern cosmos so that we are again, though in a different form, able to acknowledge the presence of normative considerations as an autonomous domain. In other words, we ought to grasp the specific place of notions of 'the good' in our ideas of self, morality and social life itself. Rather than being constituted from the inside out – that is, values as subjective preferences – the *modern* self emerges out of the reflexive articulation of objectively available ideas of the good that have a direct connection to the self's own biography. The self possesses an irreducible moral texture and, even as our identities and biographies are by no means exclusively focused on moral questions, they are fundamentally constituted by the moral dimension of strong evaluations (1989: 33–4, 42–7, 91). The key way in which this moral texture makes itself felt is through a plurality of goods that give rise to competing claims to rightness. The content of these competing claims is not wholly contingent but neither are they fixed: they change over time, are deeply personal and appeal to the world as things whose intrinsic worthiness is secured externally: 'our normal understanding of self-realization presupposes that *some things are important beyond the self*, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs' (1989: 507, my italics). Claims to rightness are therefore a key part of the dense moral narratives within which we live our lives. These actually make our moral claims intelligible as moral claims: a decision on the right course of action, a moral dilemma, an ethical controversy, they all need to be understood within the context within which they have emerged because therein lie the contents that make them such.[4]

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[3] To that extent, his position is compatible with a critical realist perspective. See, for instance, my discussion of how Margaret Archer engages with Taylor's work in Chapter 7. But as we will discuss there, Taylor's approach is too restrictive from a sociological view point: empirically, the things that matter to people are of various kinds, *not all of them moral or normative*. But for now the argument to keep in mind is that because the normative is ultimately constituted by implicit references to what is a human being, Taylor's preference for strong moral evaluations may be justified philosophically.

[4] Not surprising for a Hegel expert, Taylor's (1995b) position here echoes Hegel's (1975: 75–85) own critique of Kant's ethical formalism. As we will discuss below, however, the cost of this critique seems to be a fundamentally narrow misunderstanding of the role of

Against purely metaphysical conceptions of the good that treat these as given, Taylor claims that the moral narratives within which the modern self is articulated are socially constructed, culturally specific and dialogical in character. Because they are highly general, they can also give rise simultaneously to various normative claims and tend to remain articulated only imperfectly. Taylor (2007) calls these the background assumptions, the framework or indeed the 'social imaginaries' within which human life unfolds. These imaginaries belong to the quasi-transcendental equipment that make human life possible and any moral claim understandable: 'I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us . . . living within such strongly qualified horizons is 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' (1989: 27). As we have seen before, nothing short of a fundamental anthropology is at stake here because, without such explicit moral articulation, '[w]e would cease to be human' (1989: 97). These frameworks can be seen as quasi-transcendental, first, because they are the ones that allow for the configuration of actual moral positions or challenges and, second, because we cannot just turn them into the object of explicit debate (1989: 31–9). What is interesting for our purposes here is that the relationships between self and the good life hinge precisely on what it means to lead a life worth calling human.[5]

Another feature of this soft transcendentalism is the fact that it is always and necessarily lived in the immanence of the particular: it belongs to concrete individual and socio-historical circumstances. Moral ideas are central to our personal and collective self-identity and human agency is critically defined by how these identities respond to 'some orientation to the good' (1989: 33). Things in the world become significant for the self and this is the main reason why conceptions of the good life remain key in Taylor's definition of both the self and morality (1989: 14–15, 68–76). This can of course be seen as another way of rehearsing his idea that humans are 'self-interpreting animals' who become strong evaluators (1985a: 45–75). We may call this argument the *co-constitution* of strong evaluations and moral goods, where the former refer to the autonomous powers of human agency and the latter describe the objective moral nature of the world itself. Strong evaluations are genuinely adequate for a moral universe that is itself autonomous.

procuduralism in modern ethical life. See Chapters 4 and 5, above, and Chernilo (2013a: 135–8) for further discussion.

[5] Further justification for the role of transcendental arguments can be found in Taylor (1991b: 31–41, 1995a: 20–33).

In a formulation that reminds us of Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) idea of an hermeneutic circle, the status of these background assumptions depends also on their linguistic articulation.[6] The relationship between self and identity is what we usually refer to as personal life and Taylor contends that this always takes place in a narrative form (1989: 47–52). It is this particular and linguistically dense context that explains Taylor's at least partial scepticism towards generic ideas of the human being; in his view, notions of the human tend to remain empty vis-à-vis our *unique* identities and unspecific vis-à-vis the *particular* locations of self. But this is only half of the story, as we have seen that Taylor is not prepared to fully abandon ideas of the human. He acknowledges that the moral sources that constitute our identities and sense of selfhood are indeed ultimately reliant on ideas of the human being: 'our moral reactions … involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings … a *moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human*' (1989: 5, my italics). In other words, what makes the connection between self and good a specifically moral one is the way in which it is built on an implicit principle of humanity. The things that matter to the self *create*, or at least articulate, a *moral* outlook because they ultimately offer an image of the human; those strong evaluations are those that make a human life worth living. Even as I am taking Taylor's argument in a direction that is different from his own, this is another key intuition for my project of a philosophical sociology: strong normative orientations are based, and therefore ought to be reconstructed, around our ideas of the human. Taylor's unique contribution to unpacking what I described in the Introduction as a universalistic principle of humanity lies in his account of the relationships between a sense of self and external goods: this is precisely why it makes sense to treat people as strong evaluators who care about moral goods. As they give specific content to our lives, moral goods play a primordial role in telling us why our life is worth living: family and the nation, personal vocations and advocacy causes all belong here. We care about things whose moral texture is valuable in itself.

We now know that strong evaluations are key to human life because our sense of self is constituted primarily through the goods we value. And we have also said that, in principle at least, people are not moral fundamentalists because, while moral goods are in fact central to the constitution of the modern self, the self itself is not exclusively a moral one. While we necessarily value some goods more than others, we neither require nor

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[6] On Taylor's relationship with modern hermeneutics, see Smith (2004). In this interpretation, the uniqueness of Taylor's position in the tradition of modern hermeneutics is the importance he gives to *moral* self-interpretation.

operate with a single 'hypergood' that always and necessarily trumps all other possible things we care about. Taylor contends that herein lies a major gap between modern moral philosophy and sociocultural experiences of the self. On the one hand, moral philosophers tend to operate with conceptions of the good that turn themselves into 'the standpoint from which [all other moral goods, DC] must be weighed, judged, and decided upon'; yet, on the other hand, people develop a much more nuanced, tolerant and ultimately fluid relationship to what counts as an adequate moral good: humans are strong evaluators in a world of multiple moral goods (1989: 63). People are moral pluralist in a way that academic moral philosophy finds problematic – both logically and normatively. Hypergood is then Taylor's term of choice for the presupposition he thinks underpins all the meta-ethical positions that he rejects in modern philosophy; most saliently, naturalism and the various forms of ethical proceduralism from Kant in the late eighteenth century to Habermas and Rawls in the late twentieth century.

In fact, the gap between people's multiple evaluations of various goods and pretentious hypergoods that locate themselves at the pinnacle of human morality makes matters ever more difficult for people in their everyday life because our self-interpretations are not available through meta-languages (1985a: 40). Taylor's Hegelian credentials are again visible here: moral hierarchies thus constituted are unrealistic in their expectations as much as they are unhelpful in solving particular problems. Taylor accepts that hypergoods are genuinely inspired by 'the strongest moral ideas, such as freedom, altruism and universalism' but this does not change the fact that, in his view, thinkers that uphold modern proceduralism are 'caught in a strange pragmatic contradiction, whereby the very goods which move them push them to deny or denature all such goods. *They are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking.* Their thought is inescapably cramped' (1989: 88, my italics). The fundamental value that proceduralism promotes, but is unable to acknowledge explicitly, is a sense of 'universal benevolence' as the unrestricted possibility of good for all (1989: 260). This, in turn, is central to the egalitarian convictions of the modern age. Taylor contends that there is nothing wrong per se with benevolence and egalitarianism, nor does he see them as an ideological mask that is used to cover ulterior material interests. The problem arises when they are treated as hypergoods because then they get in the way of the more fundamental process of moral articulation between the competing goods that actually make up the modern self.

Taylor contends that this problem is largely self-inflicted by philosophers themselves because the very notion of a hypergood is a spurious

philosophical creation: its status above other goods can never be adequately construed, let alone rationally justified. It is only the *belief* that hypergoods *must* actually exist that turns ethical and moral reasoning into a problem of obligation – whether and how we ought to follow their commands under *all* circumstances – and it is only on these grounds that we are led to believe that value conflicts are ultimately irresolvable. If we abandon the idea of hypergoods, with them goes also the centrality of obligation in moral theory. In turn, we may then start concentrating on the articulation of our various conceptions of the good as it actually take place in our lives. The full implications of Taylor's critique of procedural universalism will be assessed in the last section of this chapter, but we can highlight three main ideas here. First, modern proceduralism is in his view based on the wrong presupposition that one single value, or conception of the good, can adequately and definitively organise the full range of normative experiences of a modern self who lives in a complex context of multiple moral demands. Second, proceduralism concentrates on the will and obligation of an isolated individual rather than on the sociocultural traditions and attachments that constitute the modern self. A conception of the good life is always the successful articulation of competing, though not necessarily opposing, culturally dense moral narratives. Third, proponents of ethical proceduralism remain silent about how their own articulation has come about; modern proceduralism cannot explicitly justify the goods it promotes, let alone account for why it must become a hypergood. Without these three arguments, we can recast Weber's problem of values as we no longer presuppose that value conflicts are unsolvable: gods are not always at war with each other – they do not demand absolute loyalty and their demands are not necessarily incompatible.

Modern proceduralism is of course not the only available position in modern moral philosophy, but alternative moral theories are equally if not more problematic, Taylor contends. Power theories, as they transpire in Nietzsche's transvaluation of values and Foucault's genealogy, are right in unpacking the underlying motifs that remain hidden in ethical proceduralism and also in showing the substantive contents on which they are based but cannot openly declare. Indeed, the major impact of Nietzsche's thesis on the transvaluation of values lies precisely in having uncovered the aporia that comes with any notion of the hypergood: all claims to offer an ultimate standard are negated in practice by the various conflicts that arise *between* standards; the claim of being able to orient all value decisions is negated by the very moral conflicts that they *actually* trigger (1989: 65, 99). But in Taylor's view, Nietzsche and Foucault's critiques are flawed even in their own terms because all they are able to see is a conflict between moral claims which are all equally unwarranted as moral claims.

For them, *normative* conflicts do not exist because there is no independent normative realm at all: their rejection of modern proceduralism as an inadequate moral ontology leads them to abandon altogether the possibility of a consistent moral ontology. In turn, this makes their normative stances simply unintelligible: where does the relevance of laying bare unwarranted moral claims lie if there are no genuine normative motifs in the first place? As they rightly uncover that power claims *can* underpin moral arguments, they wrongly conclude that all moral claims are power claims in disguise – in effect, that there is no such thing as *moral* claims. As they reject any possible idea of an objective good, they turn out to be as reductionist as the proceduralism they criticise.[7]

In addition to proceduralism and theories of power, Taylor also discusses a third position in contemporary moral theory. Best articulated in modern epistemology than in moral philosophy itself, he uses the term naturalism to describe an attitude that sees ethical questions as exempt from the need for further articulation.[8] Utilitarian positions are the main representative of this strand because the 'good' and the 'bad' to which they make reference seem to be traced back, unproblematically, to both our own personal preferences and the 'universal benevolence' of the greater numbers (1989: 260–84). Their ideas of the moral good fall short of Taylor's position because what counts as moral here is wholly dependent on the subjective point of view of the simple weigher: strong evaluations become impossible because there is neither sociocultural or biographical articulation nor an objective moral universe. In their suppression of substantive moral goods, contends Taylor, naturalism and proceduralism complement rather than oppose one another: 'freedom and epistemological suspicion of strong goods bind together utilitarians and naturalists of all sorts, as well as Kantians' (1989: 84). Ethical naturalism shares with modern proceduralism a concern with human dignity and the avoidance of suffering, and these otherwise different positions also share the fact that, rather than being neutral, the values they promote depend on the moral vocabularies within which they have been articulated (1989: 8, 57).[9]

[7] Taylor concludes that the postmodern position in ethics is 'delusional' (1989: 504). This is a similar argument to the one that I offered in the Introduction against the inconsistencies of contemporary posthumanism: if the human is little else than a fiction, where does the normative motivation to 'put things right' come from? Postmodernity's normative claims are, Taylor contends, ultimately self-destructive (1985a: 7).
[8] As we will see, Taylor uses naturalism as a key term to emphasise all that is wrong with modern human and social sciences. This somewhat reductive use of the term has not gone unnoticed by critics (Dreyfus 2004), and indeed Taylor accepts that his use of the term may be somewhat unfair (1989: 332). Against this reductionism, see my arguments in Chapters 3 and 4.
[9] In relation to the problem of anthropocentrism, Taylor contends that a consistent naturalist position has the additional feature of being anti-anthropocentric. In this case, the argument

Moral evaluations become meaningful because they appeal to conceptions of the good rather than because they follow abstract procedural rules or meta-ethical principles; they are relevant because they allow for the articulation of real dilemmas rather than because they make it possible to reduce *all* moral conflicts into one. Moral decisions *motivate* rather than push the individual to act in a particular way and, because of that, they construe justifications for the course of action that has been chosen. Moral articulation needs to remain meaningful for the self in its own context and symmetrical vis-à-vis other normative positions because moral knowledge allows for no position of privilege. Thus conceived, Taylor's conception of the good life avoids being turned into a hypergood because, rather than the triumph of a particular conception of the good which is then used to organise social life as a whole, it primarily consists in the satisfactory articulation of the various moral demands that are present in one's biography. Individuals constitute themselves through the evaluations that they make. A soft version of a hypergood seems to re-emerge within Taylor's own position, however. He gives pride of place to those 'constitutive' goods that are not only able to orient action but render further goods worthy of pursuit. He defines these constitutive goods as 'something the love of which empowers us to do and be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being' (1989: 93). Constitutive goods are different from hypergoods because they are not abstract rules; instead, they need always to be articulated within particular lifeworlds and through personal motives. Constitutive goods are unique because of their transitive quality: they elicit our attachment to further goods and thus provide a more sensible way of ranking various goods. Whether Taylor is partly backtracking on his previous critique of proceduralism will be assessed more fully below. But for now we still need to get a more complete picture of the, to my mind problematic, ontological underpinnings of his argument:

because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives as a "quest". But one could perhaps start from another point: *because we have to determine our place in relation to the good*, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story. (1989: 51–2, my italics)[10]

is that naturalism need not be rejected but fundamentally regrounded (1985a: 2–3, 7). See Chapter 1 and the Epilogue.

[10] Interestingly, Richard Rorty (1994: 20) remains unconvinced and contends that Taylor *is* committed to his own theory of moral 'hypergoods', not least because Taylor's constant recourse to a language of moral absolutes may be construed as a form of fundamentalism. Conversely, one may show that John Rawls (1999b: 312–15), for instance, also speaks of *primary* goods that are not hypergoods because they allow for the further organisation of personal interests in society.

Taylor emphasises here one side of his argument that we have encountered already: because all ideas of the good actually take historical and narrative form, we can only form our identities through the dense moral narratives thus constituted. This is what makes our moral orientation a *quest* in the strong sense of the term – not least in terms of the theological and teleological implications of seeing it as a project where the subjective and the objective are expected to come together. But in this last quotation I have highlighted an additional argument that, although it does not get systematic treatment in Taylor's own account, for my purposes is at least equally important: why does the self 'have to' orient itself necessarily to the good? How does the self attain certainty that a good is indeed such? Can our strong evaluations be *fundamentally* wrong? How do we deal with opposite visions about whether a particular moral good is indeed a good? There seem to be at least two sets of issues at stake here: first, there is the question of Taylor's critical position towards universalism and his narrow conception of naturalism.[11] Second, we need to consider whether Taylor's claim of an automatic congruence between self, good and morality leads him back to the kind of metaphysics he had sought to leave behind through his argument about the social, cultural and historical articulation of moral goods.

II

For all its philosophical depth and sophistication, Taylor's account of the socioeconomic trends that have given rise to modern societies is remarkably conventional. Taking the 1800s as the key transition point that marks the rise of modernity, Taylor argues that 'Western', 'liberal' or 'bourgeois' modernity is fundamentally marked by 'the slow spreading outward and downward of the new modes of thought and sensibility to new nations and classes, with the transfer in each case involving some kind of adapting and transformation of the ideas themselves' (1989: 394). These major ideas that spread all over the world (outwards) and to lower social classes inside Western nations (downward), are the three themes that organise the bulk of the historical exposition in *Sources*. First, a sense of *inwardness* that is constitutive of modern notions of the individual. This notion of an inner depth is what allows mechanistic separations between subject and object, mind and body,

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[11] We will come back to these questions at the end of the chapter, but think, for instance, whether Taylor's critique of Habermas fails to engage with Habermas's own conception of the lifeworld. Whatever one may think of Habermas's substantive argument about the constitution of the lifeworld, his main point remains: all universalistic positions now take place within particular sociocultural lifeworlds. For a more nuanced critique of Habermas, see Taylor (1991a).

or consciousness and the world. Second, a new valorisation of *ordinary life* so that traditional ideas of the good life – participation in public life, honour in the battlefield or the philosopher's contemplative life – become replaced by those domains that are more salient in modernity: economic life, technological success and the spheres of intimacy and family life. Third, a rediscovery of *expressive nature*, in the dual sense that 'pristine' nature becomes a major source of inspiration and that the inner life of the individual must find a way out to the world through aesthetic expression.

A more or less coherent picture of the modern world obtains from the combination of these three trends: an objectified vision of the outside world that is open to unrestricted human manipulation, a flattening of all social domains as being of equal value for individual as well as for collective life (modern societies have no single sphere that acts as its 'centre'), and an equally one-sided representation of the autonomous individual who is self-sufficient and for whom *finding* her inner voice may become a major purpose in life. The modern world develops an anthropocentric self-conception through an ultimately inconsistent combination of naturalistic objectivism *and* radical subjectivism.[12] Given that Taylor's primary concern is to explain the rise and main features of modern notions of the self, the route towards radical subjectivism is the one he explores at greater length. The modern ideal is that of a subjective will that is fully independent from the external world in its constitution and is equally autonomous from it for the fulfilment of its projects. The modern, 'punctual self' that Taylor reconstructs entails self-control and self-love (Locke's utilitarianism), self-reflection (Descartes's cogito), self-sufficiency (Leibniz's monads), self-determination and freedom (Kant's categorical imperative of morality and Rousseau's general will) and self-esteem and self-expression (Montaigne's interiority and Bacon's practical sense). Taylor (1989: 175–6) summarises his object of critique thus:

The philosophy of disengagement and objectification has helped to create a picture of the human being, at its most extreme in certain forms of materialism, from which the last vestiges of subjectivity seem to have been expelled. It is a picture of the human being from a completely third-person perspective. The paradox is that this severe outlook is connected with, indeed, based on, according a central place to the first-person stance. Radical objectivity is only intelligible and accessible through radical subjectivity.

The individualism that is central to the rise of modern culture and institutions seems to have been first articulated in the modern tradition of natural law which, since the seventeenth century, has changed the ways in

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[12] See Rosa (1998) for further discussion of how Taylor's critique of naturalism and emotivism mirror one another.

which new social and political commitments are framed as subjective rights
(1989: 305). A later source for this radical subjectivism is the expressive
view of human life whereby artistic *epiphany* – primarily for the creator but
eventually also for the spectator – becomes 'genuinely mysterious, and it
possibly contains the key – or a key – to what is to be human' (1989: 481).
But the importance of the artist and of the work of art in modernity go
beyond the aesthetic as a self-contained domain and becomes deeply spiri-
tual; it also accounts for the modern obsession with originality as central to
expressivism and its idea of the inner voice (1989: 375–6, 1991b).
To locate, as Taylor does, seventeenth-century natural law theory at the
centre of the intellectual transformations that gave rise to modern social and
political thought is now relatively unproblematic in the philosophical litera-
ture (Hochstrasser 2000, Schneewind 1998).[13] But the same cannot be said
in relation to social scientific literature for which the rise of sociology and
modern social science in general is seen as a result of the French and
American Revolutions (Giddens 2003). The more conventional view here
remains that the emergence of sociology as *empirical* political philosophy
meant the rise of a scientific programme that was openly opposed to modern
natural law theory from Grotius and Puffendorf to Hobbes, Rousseau and
Kant (Wagner 2006). The argument here is really twofold: first, against the
social scientific mainstream, Taylor rightly contends that seventeenth-
century natural law theory is or at least was central to the rise of the modern
normative imagination. In reading this tradition as a form of radical indivi-
dualism that seeks to foster a wholly detached sense of individual autonomy,
Taylor explicitly echoes the mainstream position that its key feature lies in
its possessive individualism (Macpherson 1964). Second, however, the
counterargument can be made that one main reason that explains why
seventeenth-century natural law theory is in fact central to the rise of
modern sociology is precisely because it does *not* offer a wholly individua-
listic argument; rather, it is itself an attempt to explain the rise of modernity
as the articulation of the descriptive and normative claims, individual and
collective life, natural and social domains. Even if there is no space to
address this debate in full here, I would briefly like to make one comment
in this regard. In relation to Kant, for example, Taylor contends that Kant's
formalism is based on a complete rejection of the idea of human *nature* as
having *any* empirical determination (1989: 83, 363, 1985b: 318–37).
The strictures of the categorical imperative of morality are there precisely
to make it stand not only above but also against individual desires and
particular inclinations. But the argument can be made that this is not
Kant's position at all, and that the categorical imperative was in fact a way

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[13] See Taylor (1989: 11–12, 82–6, 106, 193–5 and 2007: 3–22).

to mediate *between* our particular inclinations and the necessary decentring of the same individual perspective which then allows for its generalisation (see Chapter 2). Even if Kant did not fully succeed in this attempt, the point is precisely that he tried to break away from previous natural law because he sought to construe moral arguments through the mediation of the things that matter to me as an individual and those that matter to everyone as members of the same species (Chernilo 2012a).[14]

The Enlightenment plays a particularly salient role in Taylor's assessment of modernist thinking and he contends that, through its emphasis on naturalistic epistemology, one of the Enlightenment's main insights is that the cosmos has been wholly depopulated of ideas (1989: 382–3). From the standpoint of normative thinking, this means the creation of a *humanist* position that contradicts itself because it is based on a purely naturalistic account of human beings themselves. This is a form of reductionism because it adequately accounts for neither the human soul *within* the natural universe nor human beings' own worthiness within society. While the idea of pristine and autonomous nature was more or less consensually seen 'as the source of right impulse or sentiment' (1989: 284), the substantive determination of that source remained a deeply divisive issue: it might reside in the self's interior life (and thus be based on reason or sentiment), but it can also come from the outside and be grounded on providential design or indeed the artificial environment that is society itself: '[n]aturalism neutralizes nature, both without us, and in ourselves' (1989: 383; see also: 175, 336–40).

We have said already that the critique of ethical proceduralism figures highly in Taylor's argument and we can now see that its relevance lies deep as one of modernity's constitutive moral insights. Rather than being opposed to modern naturalism, Taylor contends that moral proceduralism builds on its contentious premises. More precisely, proceduralism adopts the key naturalistic proposition that *all* aspects of human life can be accounted for in the same mechanistic way that best applies to the natural sciences; namely, the idea that some descriptions are objectively better than others on the basis of an external criterion on which everyone must agree. The very achievement of such criteria – the argument is directed explicitly to both the scientific method *and* Kant's categorical

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[14] Incidentally, C. B. Macpherson's depiction of seventeenth-century natural law theory as 'possessive individualism' is also shared by writers in the tradition of critical theory. Here, Hegel and Marx are the ones that seem to offer the much-needed but always elusive rupture with modern natural law (Marcuse 1973, Rose 2009). Indeed, Taylor's sympathies also lie with Hegel on this: 'The Hegelian battle is never between good and bad, but between two requirements of the good; and it issues in synthesis, not total victory' (1989: 388). This is undoubtedly correct, but in my view Hegel here builds on rather than breaks away from Kant (Chernilo 2013a: 121–45).

imperative – is itself seen as part of a rational learning process that makes it necessary to abandon previous beliefs that have now become demonstrably false: '[e]pistemology and moral fervour are mutually supporting' (1989: 405). A key tension upon which all modern moral theories have to dwell is, Taylor contends, the dual affirmation of ordinary life, on the one hand, and the strong assertions about the things we deeply care about, on the other: '[w]e sympathize with both the hero and the anti-hero; and we dream of a world in which one could be in the same act both' (1989: 24). The ordinary of everyday life and the extraordinary of exceptional actions both make normative assessment very difficult for modern moral theory.

In ethics, proceduralism works on the presupposition that we *can* determine moral goods with independence from how the rest of our evaluations appear and are articulated in everyday life; proceduralism is said to focus only on purity and consistency as it contends that only one answer can be right at any single time. Proceduralism grows available in all realms of life because reason is not allowed to discover or uphold any substantive conception of the good – it depends *exclusively* on formal reason (1989: 67–74, 243). The metaphysical certainties that we have lost in terms of old moral truths are to be compensated by epistemic gains: we now have the whole universe at our disposal for human exploration and can openly discuss those different sources of the good which will eventually be arranged in a solid manner through the organising prowess of the procedure itself. We mentioned that Taylor echoes here the common trope that the values that make modern proceduralism possible cannot be accounted for *procedurally*. He, however, traces these criticisms back to its substantive historical roots in the Enlightenment: disengaged reason, creative imagination, individual freedom, human dignity, subjective rights, expressive self-fulfilment and natural benevolence and justice (1989: 503). In a different language, Taylor's argument shows one particular form that the interconnections between description and normativity have taken in modern societies: it is as though the 'scientific' laws of nature have necessarily to coincide with those 'moral' natural laws of humanity.

Ultimately, if these different factors appear to be self-accommodating vis-à-vis the alleged neutrality of ethical proceduralism, this is because we uncritically uphold the idea that individual and collective interests can be harmoniously accommodated within society and indeed worldwide. More dramatically, and following the post-Heideggerian tropes that we have encountered several times before, Taylor contends that this fanaticism lies at the roots of modern experiences of *terror* (1989: 330, 387).[15]

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[15] It is interesting that Nicholas Smith (2002: 1) resorts to similar existentialist motifs when he describes Taylor's general approach as one that seeks to grasp the fact that human

We live under the 'moral imperative to reduce suffering', but we now need to do this after we have lost our innocence in the possibilities of accommodating individual and collective interests (1989: 394–7). Even as we accept that modern bureaucracies create their own injustices, Western societies still see themselves as morally exceptional vis-à-vis other cultures and previous times: '[h]owever unsuccessful mankind has been in attaining "the blessings and security of self-government", no other aspiration ultimately incompatible with this is now available' (1989: 396). Having made an important contribution to the debate on multiculturalism, it is noteworthy that Taylor argues that the perennial moral dilemmas of modern times are not so much a result of the *increase* of normative pluralism but actually result from the growing inability to articulate moral ontologies adequately (1994). It is questionable however whether we can actually separate these two arguments: at the very least, consistent moral ontologies have become more challenging to articulate because of the extent to which they are exposed to normative pluralism. We move, Taylor argues, between universalistic platitudes – a rather bland obligation to others, avoidance of suffering, universal benevolence and dignity – and a sense of individuality that effectively undermines any possible attachment. The moral perplexities thus constituted *appear* then to give credence to several moral positions in modernity – not least because they are mutually incompatible. The highly incoherent coexistence of utilitarian naturalism, Kantian formalism and postmodern relativism demonstrates that they cannot orient the modern self. Taylor is decidedly committed to the idea of an objective moral universe that humans *are* able to grasp through their anthropological capacity of strong evaluations. Yet he rejects the idea that these moral intuitions can be translated into some impartial or neutral account of that world. Even if the charge of relativism does not really apply to Taylor's position, there is something deeply troubling in the fact that his critique of naturalism goes against ideas of objectivity and external reality and yet, simultaneously, the universe we inhabit is unequivocally described as oriented towards moral goods.[16]

III

If we now turn to a more critical assessment of Taylor's key arguments, a first line of enquiry has been raised by Hans Joas (2000: 141): it is hard to see how Taylor's own philosophical project emerges out of the *same* philosophical tradition he has critically reconstructed. Indeed, this can be

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beings are '*condemned to meaning*'. See, however, Taylor's critique of existentialist morality, and of Sartre in particular (1985a: 29–35).

[16] See Taylor (1985a: 45–56) and Rosa (1995) for further discussion.

addressed as a methodological question – how is Taylor's philosophical history of modernity being construed? – but it is also a substantive one: having been so critical of the modern philosophical tradition, the intellectual sources for his own project still require further elucidation.[17] Taylor is to be praised for avoiding the kind of claims to originality that are so pervasive in contemporary debates and yet he offers little in terms of an actual self-positioning of his philosophical project. Taylor's explicit assessment of modern Western philosophy is extremely critical and his narrative becomes a teleological one that leads to the regressive reductionisms of naturalism and emotivism. The argument in *Sources* is arguably best read as a critique of the unilateral and ultimately excessive importance that inwardness, expressiveness, naturalism and the everyday have had in modern moral philosophy rather than as a thorough rejection of them. Taylor does not fall for a sense of philosophical culmination so that the trajectory of modern philosophy reaches its pinnacle in his own work. But this lack offers a strange sense of a 'punctual' philosopher who does not really engage with the positive sources of his own moral ontology. Differently put, Taylor's theory of the self as a strong evaluator of objective moral goods has had to emerge, at least partly, out of the same sources that he criticises: Taylor's self is one who *can* see the world for what it is, whose moral compass *is* based on everyday life experiences, for whom the natural world exists without reifying it and yet it is also a self who above all is able to organise all these through infallible strong evaluations. Whether this criticism goes to the heart of Taylor's argument, or it rather remains a methodological one, can be said to depend on whether he is ultimately able to offer a clear account of the thick cultural traditions within which this cosmology has emerged and, quite crucially, how they connect to the prevailing consensus he has just deconstructed.[18]

An additional question has to do with the universalistic underpinnings of the idea of strong evaluations. To the extent that Taylor treats strong evaluations as that species-capacity that defines normal human agency, and that the very possibility of talking about a human *identity* is based on people being in possession of strong evaluations that refer to substantive moral goods, there can be no question that he does see it as a general anthropological property. But given that strong evaluations are also defined in opposition to the weak preferences and dispositions of the

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[17] A similar critique has been made against Karl Löwith's (1964) argument *Meaning in History*: if his historical reconstruction describes a process of increasing secularisation, it is not altogether clear what are the intellectual resources Löwith can actually draw from so that he *is* able to step outside of the very historical trends that he is describing. See Barash (1998).

[18] Taylor's (1995b) extensive discussion of Hegel as his intellectual hero remains only partly useful in this case. While a Hegelian assessment of the philosophical tradition is of course available to Taylor the scholar, this is the same 'Hegelianism' that Taylor's *Sources* shows to have been defeated for the purposes of significant sociocultural articulation.

simple weigher, the door is not wholly shut to some form of elitism whereby greater humanness is attached to those who commit, say, to altruistic causes. Taylor's argument that the simple weigher *lacks* the depth, reflexivity and articulacy that can only come with strong evaluations is unsatisfactory – both descriptively and normatively.

At the beginning of this chapter, I commented on Taylor's argument of a moral cosmos that is populated by autonomous conceptions of the good and of a self whose very humanity depends on its ability to recognise these goods as goods (and thus becoming attached to some or indeed several of them). Cosmos and self encounter one another through the intersubjective articulation of these goods in the thick cultural backgrounds within which people construe their strong evaluations. No argument has been given, however, on how or why the self's strong evaluations and objective moral goods attract one another. Taylor's argument that I quoted above that 'we cannot but orient ourselves to the good' does not work sociologically. As mentioned, the philosophical foundation of this argument is that no *social* order can be established outside a moral ontology, that all moral ontologies uphold a plurality of goods and that, at this collective level, goods do prevail over evils. As individuals make these traditions their own, they recognise that they are preceded by them and grow up within them. But after the experiences of modernity this is deeply problematic: how are we to account for socialisation under Nazi Germany or the apartheid regime? Obviously, Taylor is not going to conceive extreme forms of racism as a moral *good*, but then he must explain how is it possible that racism *can* reach a position in which it is treated as one; he ought to explain how, in his own language, *evil* may also hold together self and the moral order. It looks as though Taylor still has two other options – although neither leaves him in a better position. A first option is to secure the virtuous connection between self and world on theological grounds. This may be acceptable to Taylor on the basis of his personal religious beliefs, but cannot be justified on sociological, historical or even philosophical arguments.[19] Interestingly, these religious commitments may go also to explain the philosophical sources that remain partly unaccounted for within his work.[20] A second option would be for Taylor to argue, or at least accept, that connections between self and cosmos are pre-programmed biologically, but this is of course an

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[19] On Taylor's reliance on religious arguments, see (1989: 317, 352, 506). The difficulty with arguments that imply religious commitments is that their justifications for the position of values remain speculative rather than strictly philosophical. At times, we are even left with the impression that Taylor cannot really transcend the modern emotivism he quite rightly criticises: we are 'moved', he says, by certain goods 'as something infinitely valuable' (1989: 74) See also Joas (2013).

[20] See, for instance, Paul Tillich (1964).

argument that runs against Taylor's own critique of modern naturalism. It is then worthy of mention that Taylor's critique of naturalism as a possible source for moral thinking is in fact not far apart from two key arguments that we found in Hans Jonas's own *ethical* naturalism: on the one hand, the modern idea of a normative-less cosmos is inconsistent and, on the other, moral arguments that create obligations are ultimately based on *existence* and not on *rational justifications*. Taylor's (1989: 77) proposition that 'articulating a vision of the good is not offering a basic reason' may be seen as compatible with the first part of Jonas's (1984: 39) imperative of responsibility that 'requires no deduction from a principle'. We have seen that Jonas's answer is problematic in its own right. Yet it does have the advantage that it poses the problem more radically because Jonas explicitly states that we can only dispense of reason as the foundation of morality because a sense of the good 'is powerfully implanted in us by nature' (Jonas 1984: 39). While still amenable to hermeneutical appropriation within one's own cultural traditions, this conception of moral goods is altogether different from the cultural narratives that Taylor speaks about. Perhaps counterintuitively, Jonas and Taylor share the dogmatic infallibility that is constitutive of any argument for which the self cannot *but* orient itself to the good. But whereas Jonas offers the imperative of responsibility as a *formal* criterion with the help of which we *can* assess moral questions, we have seen that Taylor rejects ethical formalism altogether.[21] A form of essentialism seems to take over Taylor's phenomenology of morality (Joas 2000: 143).

Taylor sides with Arendt's criticism that Kant's categorical imperative of morality reproduces the premises of the utilitarianism that it seeks to overcome. In Taylor, however, this is presented through a reading of Kant whereby the categorical imperative is seen as articulating exclusively a concept of negative liberty. To an extent, this was of course Hegel's critique of Kant: 'Kant's moral autonomy has been purchased at the price of *vacuity*' (1995b: 371, my italics).[22] Taylor rightly defends Hegel's ideas of spirit, *Volksgeist*, state and community against the charge of totalitarian implications, but if this is in fact the case, then these same atrocities of the twentieth century show that Hegel's original critique of Kant's *formalism* has itself missed the point: the radical humanism of Kant's categorical imperative cannot be made responsible for the cruelties that may (or may

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[21] Interestingly, Jonas's rejection of Kantian morality while *adopting* a procedural formalism of his own speaks in favour of Taylor's argument that moral Kantianism and naturalistic epistemology reinforce one another. This is another dimension in which Jonas misses how much his argument mirrors Kantian ones. See Chapter 4.

[22] The idea of *vacuity* to describe Kant's moral theory appears four times in the following pages (1995b: 373 and 375).

not) have been committed on its behalf. Taylor's assessment of Hegel shows the constant themes of the communitarian critique: rampant individualism and modern bureaucracy turn everything into means and ends. But he then becomes unable to find any positive normative content within modern institutions because of the reductionist understanding of Kantianism itself (1995b: 365–88, 537–46). *Pace* Hegel *and* Taylor, the normative force of Kant's proceduralism is anything but *vacuous*: belonging as it does to the realm of pure practical reason, the *normative* purchase of modern ideas of autonomy and self-determination are to do with the possibility of individuals developing a moral compass and not with logical integrity. Taylor is too quick in his dismissal of the normative content of universal ideas of humanity.

Somewhat ironically, I suppose, at the beginning of *Sources* Taylor contends that, with regard to questions of the dignity and integrity of life, 'we are all universalists now' (1989: 6). To an extent, this seems to mean that several of our modern institutions – free speech, political self-determination, equality before the law and negative liberties – are indeed built around ideas of human dignity and universal benevolence. Yet they are also described as the rather empty universalism of 'post-Enlightenment banalities' (Taylor, cited in Joas 2000: 123). I wholeheartedly disagree: Taylor's philosophical critique of this form of universalism is possible, indeed presupposes in a fundamental sense, that there are *some* universalistic principles that he can take for granted as they have become institutionally secured in 'the West'. I do not want to raise the criticism that Taylor's arguments are Eurocentric, not least because rights to freedom of expression and privacy remain highly important and are being contested everywhere in the world. But these universalistic ideas suddenly become far less banal if we accept that, twenty-five years after the original publication of *Sources*, some of these values themselves just cannot be taken for granted – in 'the West' as much as everywhere else in the world. From detentions without charges to practices of sexual mutilation, from equal marriage to institutional racism, from the legal duties towards refugees to the threats of global warming, universalistic arguments that are based on our common anthropological features as human beings are neither banal nor can they be taken for granted.

Taylor is not taken aback by the modern challenges of normative pluralism and transcultural visions of the good. There is no single or all-encompassing moral framework that is universally accepted and Taylor rightly points out that this does not lead automatically to value incommensurability:

we can, in principle, understand and recognise the goods of another society as goods-for-everyone (and hence for ourselves). That these are not combinable

with our own home-grown goods-for-everyone may indeed be tragic but is no different in principle from any of the other dilemmas we may be in through facing incombinable goods, even within our own way of life. (1989: 61)

It is therefore acceptable to speak of these goods-for-everyone

provided we afford the same status to those of other societies we are trying to understand. This does *not* mean of course that all our, or all their, supposed goods will turn out at the end of the day to be defensible as such; just that we don't start with a preshrunk moral universe in which we take as given that their goods have nothing to say to us or perhaps ours to them. (1989: 62)

It is not only possible but actually essential that, as we come to recognise and then assess different normative positions, we see some of the goods on display as *actually* goods-for-everyone. Normative conflicts or misunderstandings are as possible within a cultural tradition as they are among them. To the same extent that we fully appreciate that there *may* be conflicts between values, we do not have to anticipate as a conclusion that values will necessarily refute one another. This is precisely the argument in the conclusion to *Sources*:

What emerges from the picture of modern identity as it develops over time is not only the central place of constitutive goods in moral life . . . but also the diversity of goods for which a valid claim can be made. The goods may be in conflict, but for all that *they don't refute each other . . .* Close and patient articulation of the goods which underpin different spiritual families in our times tends, I believe, to make their claims more palatable. (1989: 502, my italics)

But if this is ultimately the case, then we are not far from the type of regulative role of universalistic ideas that I am advocating in this book. Indeed, in order to turn these values into moral goods, we need honest critical examination of our own position and increased self-awareness of each other's blind spots. Taylor's normative optimism on this count, which I share, depends not only on the possibilities of intercultural dialogue (Chernilo 2012b). But I should think that it also requires, against Taylor's position, *some* form of proceduralism; otherwise it is not clear how this good-spirited reflexivity will work – let alone be seen as enough for the progressive widening of our moral compass. If, as Taylor contends, possibilities for normative understanding are to remain open – and the fact that they are is an empirical claim rather than a normative one – then we also need a bolder proposition about how this is going to work. And for us to do this proceduralism remains key.

It may be argued that Taylor's normative optimism is skewed because of his commitment to a positive relationship between self and the good. Even if we put to one side the quasi-theological objection of whether evil is

indeed real, a sociological challenge remains: normative pluralism and the logic of unintended consequences still leave us with the dilemma that genuine commitments to moral goods translate into perverse or even evil consequences. As he reflects on the various sources of fanaticism in modern times where evil prevails over good, the *grounds* on which Taylor can justify his opposition to, say, totalitarian or anti-democratic regimes, are hard to pin down if we remain confined to a rejection of universalism and the opportunities for self-clarification that are afforded by modern proceduralism. Thus, after referring to the lost normative opportunities during the Nuremberg trials – the cynical use of power even in the face of the worst possible atrocities – Taylor's reflections express a clear tension: because we *can* delude ourselves about our good motives,

[t]here are good reasons to remain silent. But they cannot be valid across the board. Without any articulation at all, we would lose all contact with the good, however conceived. *We would cease to be human*. The severest injunctions to silence can only be directed to certain classes of articulation, and must spare others. The issue is to define which ones. (1989: 97, my italics)[23]

That no form of universalistic proceduralism is allowed in even *after* admissions of this kind remains a form of dogmatism on Taylor's part. Given that at stake is a form of permanent and open-ended dialogue whose output can be nothing but the tentative and temporary articulation between various goods, then there is no definitive objection to the proposition that the type of procedure involved will itself be a matter to be agreed on. Democratic deliberation in the public sphere (Habermas), universalisation of personal preferences (Kant), counterfactual anticipation of an egalitarian starting point (Rawls) or restraint in the use of natural resources in order to allow for the future continuation of human life (Jonas), all asymptotically point towards an idea of goods-for-everyone that is not based on homogeneity but on human plurality itself. Because some strong evaluations *are* better than others, no *definitive* rejection of proceduralism is needed.

[23] Taylor's need for *silence* has also been interpreted as being religiously inspired: a sense of transcendence that is beyond linguistic, let alone conceptual, articulation (Connolly 2004: 169). It is interesting, however, that Taylor uses the religious sources of modern proceduralism as an argument against it: '[w]e make the link between procedure and truth with the proof that we are the creatures of a veracious God . . . Rationality is now an internal property of subjective thinking, rather than consisting in its vision of reality' (1989: 156).