

Creative Expression and Human Agency: A Critique of the Taylorian Self

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The United Nations' *Human Development Report*¹ is commonly read as a ranking of the "best" nations in which to live according to a calculus that measures such factors as levels of income and education, access to health care, incidents of torture, and rates of incarceration. These indicators of development have largely been understood as the basic requirements for human flourishing. But what does it mean for a human being to flourish? What does the good life require? A certain level of economic prosperity? Access to fresh water and adequate nutrition? Political freedom? All of these or only some? Even the hard science of U.N. statistics will rest on prior choices about which factors contribute to human well being, and these choices reflect a philosophical position: whether we define flourishing as physical comfort, Aristotelean excellence, the utilitarian maximization of pleasure, or a Kantian good will, we rely on some conception of the agent who will live that life, and some notion of what living that life is for.

Questions of what it means to flourish presuppose a formulation of human agency, a prior ontological claim that, whether explicit or not, will underwrite whatever we attempt to say about how to live, and to live well. Many of the disputes in quality of life arguments play themselves out at this deeper level and can be more clearly analyzed and evaluated here; differences of emphasis between levels of income and education, between pleasure and virtue, are details of the application of a conception of human agency to moral, political, and economic theory. If ontology lies at the heart of ethics, the true test of any moral position or U.N. ranking will not be in the details of its claims but in the cogency and sophistication of the theory of agency upon which it relies. We cannot argue about the good life unless we have already taken a stand on whom it is good *for*, and this requires a conception of the living subject.

This year for the first time the U.N. has directly addressed these deeper issues through the expansion of its coverage to include relative measures of "cultural liberty." Cultural liberty is the "capability of people to live as they would choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options" (HDR, 15). It is the "freedom people have to choose their identity—to be who they are and who they want to be" (HDR, 27). Its denial, the U.N. asserts, leads to the restriction of identity-formation crucial to individual and social well being as it "exclud[es] people from

the cultural connections they have reason to seek" (HDR, 16). Cultural liberty is violated "by the failure to respect or recognize the values, institutions and ways of life of cultural groups and by discrimination and disadvantage based on cultural identity" (HDR, 27). This shift of focus suggests that external political and economic factors are not sufficient to safeguard human well being; there are also factors internal to identity-formation that directly impact on individuals' lives. What is implicit in the U.N. report is a conception of self-identity as fragile and as requiring the proper environment to nurture its growth. Deprivation of the means of developing a strong sense of identity will inhibit human flourishing as much as famine or war.

My purpose in this paper is to consider the theory of agency that drives the U.N.'s new breadth of scope through a careful analysis of the work of one of its inspirations, Charles Taylor. Taylor has written widely on human agency and its connections to the good life, and has formulated a sophisticated theory of the components of self-identity. However, I will argue that Taylor's theory of the self too narrowly circumscribes who can be said to be an agent through an overemphasis on language and rational articulacy, a vision of agents as necessarily moral beings, and an insistence that agency is intrinsically teleological. The U.N. report, while not a philosophical document, nevertheless points to facets of identity-formation that indicate a need to modify the Taylorian account.

The Taylorian Agent

Taylor's theory of agency is complexly woven but we can separate out various strands as a way of schematizing the whole. Some of his major claims can be encapsulated as follows: "[B]eing a self is not like having some biologically given organs, say eyes, or faculty, like vision...."² Instead our self-identities are forged through an activity that has a number of aspects. This activity is (a) "expressive" (a term showing the influence on Taylor of German Romantic thought), (b) evaluative, (c) cognitive. Human beings are "self-interpreting animals."³ "Being a self is existing in a space of issues [I]t is being able to find one's standpoint in this space" (MTS, 299). This "space" Taylor describes as a "framework" or "horizon of significance"⁴ that refers roughly to social reality, an historical and linguistic web of meanings and values that are the source of, and backgrounds for, our self-interpretations. "[L]iving within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency.... [S]tepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood" (SS, 27).

The strong qualification Taylor makes to these horizons is to assert that this "space of issues" in which we exist is in particular a *moral* one: "to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space ... in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not ..." (SS, 28). Taylor notes that his "entire way of proceeding involves mapping connections between senses of the self and moral visions, between identity and the good" (SS, x). To do this he adopts a "hermeneutic standpoint".⁵

Being an agent for Taylor is not a matter of being rational or self-interested or having any other defining attribute. It is being a "self," having an identity, which involves a certain kind of activity. Human flourishing is the proper operation of this activity—that of being oriented towards the good, or being able to seek the good in a nurturing environment. We will fail to flourish not only if we are restrained in this activity by, for example, an oppressive regime or by extreme physical hardship, but also by a situation such as Taylor finds in the contemporary West. He claims that here and now frameworks are "problematic"; there is an "open disjunction of attitudes" (SS, 17), a prevailing culture of relativism in which we have become moral skeptics, no longer able to engage in substantive discussion on questions of the good. As long as we—mistakenly—think that moral values are those that just feel right for us, as long as we think that our orientation in moral space is purely subjective and we deny the inescapability of shared frameworks of meaning that condition us, we will experience both moral impoverishment and self-stultification.⁶ I will largely bracket out Taylor's diagnosis of our modern malaise in this analysis, except to note the close and porous relation between agency and flourishing in his account. For Taylor, because having a self is an activity, it is one that we can fail to do well. There are thus internal as well as external factors that directly affect our well being, and flourishing will require both.

Taylor's account of the self is strongly influenced by the philosophy of Hegel, the German Romantics, and their modern successors in the school of philosophical hermeneutics. Modern agency is a product of historical forces, for Taylor, and its development is traced in depth in his major work *Sources of the Self*. But the self has certain synchronic or unchanging facets as well, that centre around three main areas of activity: evaluation, cognition, and teleology or purposeful action. I will address each in turn before providing suggestions for a modification of Taylor's account that offer a broader scope for understanding the needs of the contemporary agent.

Evaluation

By identity as evaluative, Taylor means that human agents are those to whom things *matter* in a unique, non-derivative way. The things that matter deeply to us are those "questions about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not"⁷; questions that offer us choices we need to consider. They could be questions about what kind of life we think is worthwhile, what kind of person we think we ought to be, or what pursuit is most valuable, in short questions we ask of ourselves *as selves* and of our lives as wholes. While the content of the questions has changed over time, this evaluative activity is part of the fundamental nature of the human agent.

Taylor suggests that we make two kinds of evaluations;⁸ with "weak" evaluations we deliberate over courses of action as means of satisfying our desires, where each course will satisfy us to some extent and the criteria we use to choose are contingent, such as one being easier, more economical, quicker, and so on, than another. "Strong" evaluations, by contrast, are second order evaluations where we evaluate the desires *themselves* in terms of their appropriateness for the kind of life we want to lead, or the values we hold—in terms of what we care deeply about. Of strong evaluations Taylor writes: "there is also a use of 'good' or some other evaluative term for which being desired is not sufficient.... [S]trong evaluation deploys a language of evaluative distinctions, in which different desires are described as noble or base, integrating or fragmenting, courageous or cowardly, authentic or superficial, and so on" (HA, 19). It is by making these second order evaluations that we forge our identities. Through the choices we make about the things most important to us, we "orient ourselves" in a space of issues and take a stand on them. If, as Taylor has noted, human beings are fundamentally "in question" (MTS, 299), it is by making strong evaluations that we answer these questions and thereby achieve a sense of self.

This evaluative activity relies heavily on language and rationality. The weak evaluator's reflection "terminates in the inarticulate experience that A is more attractive than B" (HA, 24). She has reflection, evaluation, and will but she lacks full personhood because she is *inarticulate*, because she does not have a "vocabulary of worth" or access to a "language of qualitative contrast" (HA, 24) that is rich enough to characterize the authenticity, integration, nobility, and so on of second order evaluations: she is "shallow" (HA, 26). In *Sources of the Self* Taylor admits that one reason for his emphasis on articulacy is that he shares the "Socratic" view of "reason, in the sense of *logos*, of linguistic articulacy, as part of the *telos* of human beings. We aren't full beings in this perspective until

we can say what moves us.... [T]he central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good" (SS, 92).

This focus on what I will call the "articulacy requirement" of strong evaluations can be seen further in Taylor's conception of the role practical reason plays in self-formation. Moral reasoning ought to proceed, for Taylor, on the basis of *ad hominem* argumentation, which appeals to what an interlocutor "is already committed to"⁹ and, through a series of "error-reducing moves" (EPR, 51), aims to elaborate these commitments and lead toward their full and clear articulation. This would come about through "the identification of contradiction, the dissipation of confusion, or by rescuing from (usually motivated) neglect a consideration whose significance they cannot contest" (EPR, 53). Not only does this type of argument increase an individual's "self-clarity and self-understanding" (EPR, 36), but the articulation at the center of *ad hominem* reasoning represents for Taylor a move in the direction of the good.

This form of argument is "inherently comparative"—it does not claim that a newly articulated position is "correct *simpliciter*"—but it does suggest that "whatever else turns out to be true, you can improve your epistemic position by moving from X to Y; this step is a gain" (EPR, 54). Elsewhere Taylor notes that "our attempt will be to show that the interlocutor's moral outlook could be improved"¹⁰ by fuller articulation, and this applies not just to transitions in a single subject's awareness but to interpersonal disputes in a broader social and historical context as well. Fuller articulation in rational terms represents for Taylor both an epistemic and a moral gain.

It is not enough that we make determinate strong evaluations; for Taylor we must also fully articulate our reasons for doing so. This demand for articulacy forces our expressions of identity to conform to the discursive language of rational, philosophical argumentation, a demand that will leave many behind. For example, making a commitment to vegetarianism, and living my life accordingly (and so identifying myself *as* a vegetarian if asked) is not enough to make me a deep and probing agent on Taylor's account. I must, further, provide reasons for my choice, "say what moves me" about it. To say that "it's just right" is not going to fulfill the *telos* of "bringing me closer to the good": this remains a hazy, unformed response that shows I do not have the "articulacy about depth" (HA, 26) Taylor requires. For me to realize my identity I would need to be able to explain that, for example, I hold the life of all creatures to be sacred, and for this reason find killing them unjustifiable. Notice, however, that in giving this explanation I am in fact already constructing an argument to defend my position; on Taylor's account to have an identity we need to engage in an activity that is verbal,

reflective, rational, and articulate—an activity it hardly need be said some of us will be better at than others.

But I wish to suggest that having an identity that I recognize and by which others recognize me is in many ways precisely non-verbal. Let us grant Taylor that the activity of self-identity is evaluative (in the sense of using determinate judgment). I am a committed vegetarian and I consistently exclude meat from my diet. On being invited to dinner and offered duck, I demure, saying that I am a vegetarian. These actions “label” me, identify me as having a certain commitment, as *being* a certain kind of person (“Don’t cook duck, Jane’s coming and she’s a vegetarian”). It seems that whatever I *say* about this commitment, however well I articulate my position to my consternated hosts, whatever clear and rational arguments I may use to defend it (or to convince others), will be *additional* to the values I hold and the relevant actions (including those of refusing and excluding) I perform in order to *be* what I say I am. My behavior may not be sufficient to constitute a moral commitment—I may just not like meat; there will have to be a prior strong evaluation. But it is unclear what the full articulation of this evaluation adds to the scenario, why the articulate vegetarian is a more fully aware or actualized vegetarian than the inarticulate one.

While our actions are not sufficient to constitute moral commitments they are necessary, and they are necessary in a way I assert articulate explanations are not. The playwright Wallace Shawn illustrates this point in his portrayal of the disjunction between actions and words in *The Fever*. The unnamed protagonist is on a journey of moral awakening in which she will eventually realize her own hypocrisy. Early on, she says,

I know quite a bit about what’s inside me. I’ve been a student of my feelings since I was nine years old. My feelings! My thoughts! The incredible history of my feelings and my thoughts could fill up a dozen leather-bound books. But the story of my life—my behaviour, my actions—that’s a slim volume and I’ve never read it.¹¹

Yet as the climax of the play nears she recounts this scene:

I’m in a cell, and the guard reaches into a big bag, and he pulls out this slim little book, and it’s vaguely familiar. And then he throws it at me and leaves the cell. ‘Read it,’ he says. ‘Read it.’ ‘Read it’ (59).

Reading the book of her actions supplies the protagonist with proof of her inconsistency, whatever she may have filled volumes saying or feel-

ing, and she finally concedes that “the life I lead is irredeemably corrupt” (95). This realization comes not through *ad hominem* argumentation or greater articulacy about her commitments: it is the product of the history of her behavior, behavior that has identified her *as* a hypocrite, in spite of her articulations to the contrary.

Our actions can express our identities without this added articulacy requirement. Granted that there was a prior strong evaluation, a decision reached and a commitment made, this process could have been non-verbal and inarticulate—the expression of this evaluation can occur extra-linguistically. If we are later brought to articulate our reasons for our commitments we may indeed learn more about ourselves. But we already *are* selves and do not need further articulation to realize our identities. Taylor narrows the range of who can be “full beings” when he circumscribes this activity of identity as wholly linguistic in the sense of *logos*, or rationality.

The U.N. report reflects my concerns here. Its authors are critical of what they call “communitarian” theories of the self which have “glorified the absence of choice involved in the ‘discovery’ of one’s real identity” (HDR, 16). These theories, like Taylor’s, understand the self as the product of reflection that moves from knowing subject to object of (self-) understanding, and see identity as a given truth one can be brought to realize, rather than as a product of individual self-affirming action. The U.N.’s specific concern is with the restriction of freedom in some religious and cultural communities, where the individual is brought up to identify with the dominant group, and has little opportunity to forge her own beliefs and commitments. My concern is more philosophical: Taylor is making an ontic claim, describing a certain type of agent, who cannot realistically stand for us all.

The evaluative aspect of identity further describes agents as necessarily moral beings and restricts the normative language of qualitative distinctions to a range of ethical terms. I suggest that there are other grounds on which we might make important evaluations of our goals, projects, and selves, and thus that agency need not be a moral undertaking. Imagine a hedonist who seeks pleasure and personal satisfaction above all else. This person knows what her commitments are, her actions are all consistent with them, and are made on the basis of certain interpretations of herself, others, her goals, and so on. Taylor would call her a weak evaluator: someone who seeks only to satisfy her desires, and who lacks the ethical language of qualitative distinctions needed to achieve undamaged personhood. Why? She may be unmoved by what we normally think of as moral goods (benevolence, justice) but she *is* also moved by other goods, such as self-fulfillment or even pleasure. The

mechanism of her self-making activity is not deficient, it just does not arrive at a *moral* conclusion or make a moral commitment.

Similarly, we can imagine a more familiar type, the "hard-nosed man of the world"¹² who is moved by moral goods—but not always. Sometimes he will opt for power, profit, efficiency, or instrumental control over moral ideals. These too are goods, couched in the normative language of strong evaluations, but they are not moral goods and anyone who makes such important second order reflections on their basis is not making a moral judgment about their actions or themselves. Yet here again we can be "unconfusedly" moved by the pursuit of power or wealth in a whole-hearted way as part of who we think we are or want to be, and as ideals by which we want to live.

Harry Frankfurt, on whose work Taylor based an early formulation of human agency,¹³ calls us "creatures to whom things matter" (ICA, 80), but he leaves room for non-moral ascriptions of importance in what we choose to pursue. He writes:

Even people who care a great deal about morality generally still care more about other things ... about their own personal projects, about certain individuals and groups and perhaps about various ideals to which they accord commanding authority in their lives but which need not be particularly of an ethical nature.... The role of moral judgement in the development and pursuit of concerns like these is often quite marginal, not only in potency but in relevance as well (ICA, 81).

Further, he notes that while many of the important decisions we make will be based upon non-moral considerations, "it is not wholly apparent that making them in such a way is always unjustifiable" (ICA, 81). Indeed, he concludes that we do not care about an object or a pursuit "because its worthiness commands that [we] do so" (ICA, 94), but because of the great importance we accord it for our lives.

It is interesting that Taylor, in a footnote to his early paper "What is Human Agency?" does suggest that strong evaluations "do not have to be exclusively ethical" (24, n 7), perhaps from the influence of Frankfurt's formulation. But in the twelve years between this paper and *Sources of the Self*, strong evaluations become moral evaluations, and all mention of Frankfurt drops away. Taylor's mature position is that "selfhood and morality" are "inextricably intertwined" (SS, 3), and he makes too strong a claim about what the connections are between the two. No matter how broadly he may wish to construe this idea of the ethical good—and he does intend its breadth to encompass the often incom-

patible goods of different cultures—it will not be broad enough to include someone who understands the moral goods of his framework but who opts to follow non-moral values instead. The businessman just is not—or not always—oriented towards an ethical good. We *may* at times be motivated by commonly understood moral goods, but we also may not; not being so moved may cause us to fail to flourish but it does not deprive us of a sense of identity: self-stultifying, perhaps; self-nullifying, no.

Cognition

The self-understanding and evaluation that make up our identities are interpretive acts. We make sense of ourselves by interpreting a framework of meanings that are linguistically disseminated and culturally and historically specific. Herein lies Taylor's hermeneutic approach; he makes the familiar distinction between the natural and human sciences, between scientific explanation and a historicized notion of understanding.¹⁴ Taylor argues that we do not come into the world empty; we become persons through the acquisition of language, and with this acquisition we are *already* laden with certain understandings and prejudgments about the world. We are "aware of the world through a 'we' before we are through an 'I'" (ISM, 40); language is both the mode of making our identities and its precondition. These frameworks are ontologically basic (SS, 29). Social reality is constituted by intersubjective meanings, and there is no social reality prior to or autonomous of them. This reality is also historical and so constantly changing as our interpretations in turn condition these horizons on a dialogical model. The meanings we interpret are not purely subjective; they are not "the property of one or some individuals" but rather "*intersubjective* meanings which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act" (ISM, 36). Understanding on a hermeneutic model is not linear, going from knowing subject to object of knowledge, but is circular, beginning with our situatedness in frameworks that are themselves products of prior interpretations, and developing on the basis of the contribution of our experiences and the meanings we find in them.

What we know on this model is, first, the nature of our social reality and, second, ourselves. We treat the former as demonstrable knowledge of the world; these interpreted meanings are as "real" for us as concrete objects, although this "real" is both historically and culturally relative and often incommensurable with other frameworks.¹⁵ Although these meanings are in part created by individual acts of interpretation, there is both a uniformity of experience and of communication of experience between

individuals because of the linguistic nature of these acts. Yet Taylor does not reify these frameworks. The force of the hermeneutic position is to suggest that interpretation is constitutive of what it means to be human. As Gadamer has put it, "man's relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally linguistic in nature";¹⁶ language moves from the realm of epistemology, as the means by which we communicate our ideas and knowledge of an objective world, to the realm of ontology, as the mode of being that realizes what is distinctively human.

Taylor's conception has a certain amount of philosophical currency; "frameworks" can also be construed as "conceptual schemes," "webs of belief," "paradigms," "languages," "modes of reasoning," and so on. It is a sociological commonplace to think of identity as in some way socially constructed. However, what is an otherwise convincing gloss on philosophical hermeneutics in Taylor's work suffers by maintaining a distinction between the physical and the social world, and requiring that different epistemological models be attendant upon each. Taylor asserts that while knowledge of the physical world will be universal and will work on a causal-explanatory model, knowledge of the social world will be interpretive and incommensurable between cultures and historical eras. But in some way interpretation must go all the way down: is there any object in the world of which we have a fully neutral, explanatory knowledge? There are layers of meaning that attach to the physical world as strongly as they attach to the social, and the way we know the physical world will also be part of—occur within—our frameworks. This will impact upon our sense of self.

According to Nelson Goodman, it is false to see these layers of meaning as adhering to some neutral fact of the matter or non-intentional, mute object that can also be objectively known. Goodman suggests that even sticks and stones are describable in a number of ways—as beautiful, as combustible and hard, in terms of their molecular structure, in terms of their usefulness, and so on—and that it is mistaken to take one level of description as more basic than any other.¹⁷ For Goodman, there are no objects as such, only *intentional* objects, meaning objects that are *seen as* something,¹⁸ and if this is so, the descriptions of properties of the physical world are equally parasitic on human purposes and practices as those of the social world. Goodman writes of so-called factual or neutral descriptions this way: "[T]hese objects, observations, measurements, principles are themselves conventional; these facts are creatures of their descriptions.... All convention depends upon fact, yet all fact is convention."¹⁹ If Goodman is correct, there will be no inert, neutral physical world that can be known directly without interpretation. Instead, such frameworks as Taylor posits will

encompass our knowing the world as a whole, and this means not only that our knowledge of the physical world will be interpretive but that the world we know will be constructed by these interpretations.

This adjustment to Taylor's hermeneutic stance may seem to lead us to the spectre of Idealism in that it appears to suggest the world as a whole is in some way a human construct. This is not the case, or not problematically so. Hermeneutical interpretation need not become a Hegelian notion of Absolute Idealism but can be more modest; "in the last analysis," Gadamer writes, "*a*ll understanding is self-understanding, but not in the sense of ... one finally and definitively achieved."²⁰ Reflection on our interpretive endeavors can bring to conscious awareness and call into question what is taken for granted as neutral or merely factual, and can allow for the possibility of an awareness of the horizontal nature of human existence²¹ that will be more inclusive, and that will allow for interpretations of the physical realm also to contribute to our sense of self.

Michael Krausz offers a cogent example of this.²² In Hindu tradition, the Ganges River is *not* a river: it is the embodiment of the life force and a "hallowed medium for transmigration" from one incarnation to the next. The St. Lawrence river for the average Canadian is simply a body of water. While we can "dump" a human body into the St. Lawrence, such a term does not apply to the Ganges, where bodies are instead "returned" to a sacred place. In the context of the Ganges there are none of the legal or punitive implications we would have here if we found a body in the St. Lawrence (or if we dumped one there). What we think bodies of water are will affect the way we treat them, first, but also the way we order our own goals and aspirations. A Hindu would think it of paramount importance to make a pilgrimage to the Ganges, but most likely not to the St. Lawrence. While the ideas of "pilgrimage" and "return" are part of the horizon that is Hinduism (a moral horizon), they are not merely interpretations of social reality but of physical reality itself. Rejecting separate epistemological models for the apprehension of physical and social reality widens the scope of factors that influence our identities, and that can contribute to, or hinder, our well-being.

Teleology

Taylor writes in *Sources of the Self* that "we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it" (51). To be an agent, fundamentally, is to seek genuine moral goods—to be on a moral "quest."²³ We seek not just any goods but, for Taylor, some constitutive "hypergood"²⁴ that will provide a higher motivating ideal for our lives.

Hypergoods are "the landmarks for what [we] judge to be the direction of [our] lives" (SS, 62); they operate as a "moral source," something "the love [or awe or respect] of which empowers us to do and be good" (SS, 93). The activity of identity is not a quotidian evaluation of what it is best to do tomorrow or next week but of what it is best to do in the context of our entire lives as lived in terms of some overarching ideal that provides "the standpoint from which these [other goods] must be weighed, judged, decided about" (SS, 63). Any change in commitments (from meat-eater to vegetarian, say) is for Taylor a "reasoning in transitions" where the new position is considered superior to the old, and the move from one to the other "constitutes a gain epistemically" (SS, 72) on the *ad hominem* model of reasoning.

The question this formulation raises is the extent to which Taylor is making a substantive claim about the good and the degree to which he is attributing to agency—individually and collectively—a *telos* or purpose. Because Taylor allows for the incompatibility of different frameworks across history and cultures, and because he allows that our goods can conflict, it seems that his position is merely formal: the good is what we interpret it to be—that which matters to us unconditionally. Taylor does not name some one hypergood which moves or ought to move us, or some one monolithic framework in which we live. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Taylor's position is stronger than this, that he holds a substantively purposive view of human life.

This interpretation is one that Isaiah Berlin shares. He writes:

[Charles Taylor] is basically a teleologist—both as a Christian and as a Hegelian. He truly believes ... that human beings, and perhaps the entire universe, have a basic purpose.... Consequently, everything that he has written is concerned with what people have believed, striven after, developed into, lived in the light of, and, finally, the ultimate goals towards which human beings as such are by their very natures determined to move.²⁵

For Berlin, Taylor is an essentialist. He takes Taylor to believe that this purpose is pursued by human beings "as part of their own central natures or essences" (2), in a way much like Aristotle. It is not only individuals who move towards some goal but "entire societies to which they belong" (2); Berlin ascribes to Taylor a Hegelian belief in the purposive movement of history.

On the individual level, this strong position operates in the following way. Taylor claims that "the point of view from which we might constate that all orders are equally arbitrary, in particular that all moral views are

equally so, is simply not available to us humans" (SS, 99). We cannot help but take our moral goods as *real*, a "feature of the way things are" (SS, 93), part of the "furniture of things" (SS, 68). We do not and cannot see them as the products of human interpretive activity. Taylor writes of a "demand" these goods make on us that "emanates from the world" (SS, 523) and not from ourselves; we are moved by "what is good in it rather than that it is valuable because of our reaction" (SS, 74), and our allegiance to a good is to something we see as external to ourselves. This aspect of Taylor's theory is clearly communitarian, as the U.N. report has described. We can see how the dominant method of identity-formation would be the *discovery* of (external) truths rather than the free choice or creation of a sense of self and a way of life. To insist that there is a true way to live is precisely to restrict the freedoms the U.N. is trying to safeguard.

Frederick Olafson notes that Taylor conceives of these hypergoods in a "markedly Platonic way" where the vital fact about them is "that their goodness owes nothing to our espousal of them."²⁶ Olafson suggests that Taylor's account is guided by the idea of an "ontic logos" on the Platonic model where the cosmic order "sets the paradigm purposes of the human beings within it."²⁷ But however much Taylor's position *resembles* the Platonic view, Taylor does not name the constitutive hypergoods that make these strong demands. This may cause readers to maintain that he is more pluralistic and holds a weaker view than that to which Berlin and Olafson (and I) attribute him.

But Taylor *is* clear in what he excludes from this picture, and this tells for a substantive position. The amoralist, the pleasure-seeker, the instrumentalist, the "hard-nosed man of the world" are not, on Taylor's account, strong evaluators or moral agents because they are not oriented toward a moral good or goods. About these types Taylor would say that either they suffer from a loss of orientation that will result in identity crises (SS, 27), or they really are motivated by moral goods which they deny but which can be made clear to them. He does not allow the unconfused, conscious orientation to non-moral values to be a way of forging an identity or part of human agency. This, albeit negative, stand indicates that Taylor does have some sense of what the good must involve.

His strong position becomes clearer when we consider the historical nature of these moral goods. In a manner similar to Hegel's claim that we do not know the truth until the dialectic is finally resolved, I suggest that Taylor does not claim to know the full nature of the good because we have not yet achieved it—but that we are moving towards it seems certain. In his reply to Berlin, Taylor writes that while we "are always in a

situation of conflict between moral demands" that forces us to make difficult choices and compromises, he is "reluctant to take this as the last word."²⁸ He believes a "transvaluation" of values is possible "which could open the way to a mode of life, individual and social, in which these demands could be reconciled."²⁹ Opposition or conflict is the initial condition of this dialectical process, one in which differences seem irreconcilable. But through dialogue and *ad hominem* reasoning Taylor suggests that we can transform this opposition into reconciliation. The historical sections of *Sources of the Self* enumerate the epistemic gains achieved by Western civilization, gains that parallel those made by the individual in seeking an overarching hypergood. The hope Taylor holds out for reconciliation reads as a faith in our eventually reaching some substantive good, however much we may at present be unable to name it.

The *telos* of human beings that Berlin and I attribute to Taylor is that the purpose of human life is to seek this substantive good. Individual efforts, through intersubjective interpretations, contribute to the collective *telos* of human history as it progresses towards this goal. What obscures this aspect of Taylor's work is that at each stage in history there is conflict, and Taylor seems to embrace the pluralism of values he sees in the modern era. But this putative acceptance of difference reads as adherence to a Hegelian view of history that proceeds in dialectical fashion, from conflict to conflict, but that moves in the direction of some (as yet unknown) truth. On Taylor's view, human agents, by their very nature as agents, cannot help but pursue some good that they take as external to them, as making demands on their lives and conditioning their aspirations. His sophisticated understanding of the way that conflict develops and recurs in this type of quest does not mitigate his belief that it is impossible for us to do or be otherwise.

I find this strong position implausible. It requires that the activity of identity be progressive: in our self-interpretations we are constantly becoming *better* people with each transition, we are constantly making epistemic gains, approaching some moral truth. Not only does this not square with the pluralism of both moral and non-moral values that may move us, but it construes a life as homogeneous in the sense of being lived under the aegis of some motivating ideal that informs all of our decisions and choices. At the phenomenological level this seems untrue: how many of our lives have the uniformity of purpose a quest requires? We make choices for a host of reasons, we care deeply about a variety of objects, people, and projects for which, as Frankfurt saw, moral judgment is at times simply not relevant. These things too contribute to the

creation of self-identities; as long as they are got through an interpretive and evaluative activity, they must also be part of what makes us agents.

Even if Taylor were to concede a greater breadth to the goods we pursue, his formulation of agents as purposive in the strong sense discounts one of the main motivating forces of the Romantic spirit that gave rise to the "expressive" consciousness on which he wishes to rely. For the Romantics, a sense of the world as inherently meaning/ess in any grand or monolithic way influenced the turn to an artistic and creative model of consciousness. Taylor describes the Romantic understanding of man as a being whose expression is first "an inner force [such as an idea or emotion] imposing itself on external reality" and, second, as this inner force becoming determinate only through the act of expression itself, which he likens to the creative act of the artist.³⁰ For Taylor, the interpretive and evaluative activities of agency are also creative in that our self-identities are outward expressions of our inner dreams, hopes, goals, ideals, and so on.

But what becomes of the freely creative dimension of identity if it must conform to some homogeneous and rational ideal? How do we account for the sheer diversity of ways of being this creativity would offer if we hold that there is only one (or a few) ultimate ideals to which each of us strives, or when we claim that identity must be this striving? The Romantic conception of creative expression should lead us to a more provisional picture of the activity that is human agency in that it operates in the absence of a strongly articulated notion of the good. Creative interpretations will not be charges towards some as yet unnamed distant light on this model but instead only so much howling in the darkness. Let me explore this alternative a little further, with the work of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, of course, has long been seen as the dark prophet of meaninglessness and nihilism. From his notebooks published as *The Will to Power* we find a vision starkly different from Taylor's:

[B]ecoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing* ... the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of 'aim,' the concept of 'unity,' or the concept of 'truth.' Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not 'true,' is *false*.³¹

For Nietzsche existence is not oriented to the good; it does not aim at anything at all. As he so vividly saw, one response to a realization of this lack of meaning was to lapse into nihilism, or become what Zarathustra called the last man.³² This, however, he deemed "pathological" (*WP*, 14),

and it is a misreading of Nietzsche to assume he takes this as either the best response or the only one. Nietzsche had a deep understanding of the forces that drove Romanticism, and in *Zarathustra* in particular there is ample evidence that he too understood creativity and art as the best model available to us both for making sense of human existence and for explaining how it is that we live in the face of contingency. But this model will be without the teleology in which Taylor situates human agency.

Peter Berkowitz writes that Zarathustra's mission was to determine and articulate how human beings were to live in the absence of a monolithic good or necessary world order.

He believes that as a consequence of the discrediting of a moral order inhering in nature, prescribed by reason, or given by God, it has become imperative for human beings to become gods themselves ... by fully liberating the creative will ... [and] living in accordance with what is at one and the same time an ethics of creativity and an ethics of self-deification.³³

Art, understood as aesthetic self-making or creative affirmation is, as Nietzsche wrote in his notebooks, the "redemption of those who see the terrifying and questionable character of existence" (*WP*, 452), because self-creation in the face of a contingent world is an act of courage and even defiance. But such redemption will be modest; it will be without grounding in some "true" picture of the way the world is, or faith in a higher good, or in some necessary purpose to human existence. The Nietzschean vision offers up self-creation as a prescription for man's predicament, not as something we simply do as human beings but as something we *ought* to do. Nevertheless, his description of the nature of human existence that causes him to turn to art is clearly the same as the sense of meaninglessness that moved his Romantic predecessors to aesthetic models for their philosophical theorizing.

Isaiah Berlin, in writing of his differences with Taylor, echoes this Nietzschean vision:

I believe that purposes are imposed by human beings upon nature and the world.... I believe that it is human beings, their imagination, intellect, and character that form the world in which they live, not, of course, in isolation but in communities—that I would not deny; but that this is in a sense a free, unorganized development—which cannot be causally predicted (2).

The total outcome of human behavior, for Berlin, will be determined by unorganized development, by the incompatibility of equally valid ideals and ends, and not by a cosmic plan. The notion, he writes, "of one world, one humanity moving in one single march of the faithful, *laeti triumphantes*, is unreal" (3). In contrast to Nietzsche and Berlin, Taylor, with his emphasis on the moral nature of agency, on rationality and articulation, and on a human *telos*, has in the end much more in common with Enlightenment visions of man than with the Romantic movement. A theory of agency that seeks to modify these strong claims will have the Nietzschean view at its heart and will lean towards a more creative conception of man.

The Creative Agent

Let me now draw together the various strands of this analysis into a modified conception of agency. This will draw upon Taylor's original insights, especially his notion of activity as constitutive of identity and a precondition for human flourishing. As I move quickly through Taylor's main themes in reverse order, I will demonstrate how his formulation can be expanded by an aesthetic model, leading to a more inclusive understanding of the human subject.

The absence of teleology is paramount here. It is the creative subject who makes meaning in her life, who draws from the hurly-burly of the world in which she lives the materials she will use, and who imposes on this flux and disorder her own design. She may not *know* there is no overarching human purpose, but she might. She may also feel drawn by a vision of something grander than her, may hold faith in some absolute truth for which she strives. But such striving is not the necessary ordering of human life. This conception has intuitive appeal; how many times have we heard people say that they "just fell into" the career they have, or that they did something for its own sake, because they liked it, not because it fit into the *telos* of their lives? Individuals as a whole are not single-mindedly pursuing some overarching goal, and do not order their lives according to some truth they see which draws them on. Such cohesive and singular lives are rare, the stuff of heroes and myths, perhaps, but not the norm.

Carol Shields' novel, *Larry's Party*, illustrates the kind of life my expansion of Taylor's theory aims to capture. It is the story of the life of Larry Weller, a landscape designer with a specialty in mazes, whose work is a central part of his life and is integral to how he defines himself as a person. But his career grew in the following way. After he finished high school, his mother phoned a local community college and asked them to

send out a brochure on their furnace repair course, thinking this would be a practical job for her son. Shields writes: "[S]omeone must have been sleeping at the switch, because along came a pamphlet from Floral Arts, flowers instead of furnaces."³⁴ Larry was enrolled. Years later, when working as a floral designer, Larry was married and went to England on his honeymoon. The last stop on the tour was Hampton Court, and Larry's first maze. Walking its paths, Larry

... hadn't anticipated the sensation of feeling unplugged from the world or the heightened state of panicked awareness that was, nevertheless, repairable.... [I]n this garden maze, getting lost, and then found, seemed the whole point, that and the moment of willed abandonment, the unexpected rapture [he felt as he walked through it] (36–7).

Larry fell into his career by what he called "dumb luck" (7) and a series of accidents. But however it began—and it was not pursued in a determined way because of some ideal that had moved Larry from the beginning—this job became so central to his life that the day would "arrive in his life when work—devotion to work, work's steady pressure and application—will be all that stands between himself and the bankruptcy of his soul" (77). Larry's story shows us that the striving and purposiveness of human life is contingent; the goals and aspirations that drive our choices are self-created and self-imposed, and are more modest than the idea of teleology would demand. By what we choose to do and who we choose to be, we create ourselves. It is perhaps tragic, as Nietzsche had foreseen, that if this includes allegiance to some larger vision, that vision too has been created.

The cognitive aspect of the self builds on Taylor's hermeneutic conception of frameworks. Identity is not a solipsistic creation but involves a reciprocal relation between subject and object on a dialogical model. But the meanings that comprise these frameworks are not only linguistically disseminated; they are embedded in the kinds of buildings we design, the colors we use to paint our walls, the statues we erect, the "muzak" we play on our telephone hold lines, the fashions we wear, the food we eat, how and where we pierce our bodies, the construction of our calendar, the trim of our lawns, and so on. Not all of these things have language as any integral part of them, and not all of the meanings embedded in these cultural phenomena can be "translated" into a linguistic form of communication. But all are fundamental to a sense of the world we acquire as we grow, and all are part of the culture in which we develop our identities.

The authors of the U.N. report have a similarly expansive notion of the self. They write:

A person may have an identity of citizenship (for example, being French), gender (being a woman), race (being of Chinese origin), regional ancestry (having come from Thailand), language (being fluent in Thai, Chinese and English, in addition to French), politics (having left-wing views), religion (being a Buddhist), profession (being a lawyer), location (being a resident of Paris), sports affiliation (being a badminton player and a golf fanatic), musical taste (loving jazz and hip-hop), literary preference (enjoying detective stories), food habit (being a vegetarian) and so on (HDR, 16).

The choices are not unlimited (I could not choose to be a Sumo wrestler, for example), but we can and do choose what priority to give to one or another of the various facets of our identities, and these choices involve creative expression in a way that goes beyond the limits of language.

We interpret our surroundings, we see them *as* significant, or see them as lacking in significance. We may come to know something expressible in rational terms but not because we have some determinate understanding to which we apply the details of these frameworks. Our understanding grows out of the provisional nature of our tentative attempts at interpreting the frameworks of meaning in which we are thrust. Because of the reciprocal nature of this activity (with the physical world and with other human beings), and because of the shared, intersubjective character of these frameworks, there is no threat that our understandings will be incommunicable to others, for all that this communication can be extra-linguistic.

What we know in this manner will not be realizable in any other way. Like Taylor, I assert that there is no other way in which we have identities except by these interpretive acts. There is no other way we impute meaning to the world except by living in relation to it. The idea of frameworks would not be coherent if we did not understand them as created and maintained by human interpretive activity. However, I want to soften Taylor's claim that our self-understandings in particular are so transparent. When I suggest that by interpretation we "know" ourselves, I mean that we thereby *have* identities that are expressed through our valuations of the world, our commitments, our actions, and so on. I do not mean that these identities are wholly clear to us, or that we have some exceptional self-reflective powers that provide us with a deep clarity of vision. We often do not know ourselves; we often cannot make sense of our own motivations, reactions, and actions. This lack of

transparency is both a product of the way we come to have identities and part of what having an identity means.

My account of agency differs from Taylor's in my emphasis on a model where we interpret the physical as well as the social world, and in my emphasis on the variety of forms this interpretation can take and the variety of forms the meanings of these frameworks have as they are communicated to us. Broadening Taylor's hermeneutic model leaves more room for the creativity of the subject, and takes into account the great diversity of individuals and individual modes of expression.

Finally, agency is evaluative but not in the sense of making determinate judgments or decisions based on substantive hypergoods. It is exploratory and provisional, not merely a matter of accepting or rejecting values or goods with which we are presented; nothing with which we come into contact on a creative model remains unchanged in this encounter. How I take up an ideal of benevolence or instrumental control and apply such ideals in my life will differ, greatly perhaps, from how you take up the same ideals. Taylor concentrated on the way we evaluate choices once we are confronted with them: to take this job or that one, to sacrifice time with my family to climb the corporate ladder, to eat meat or not. A more creative account of agency seeks to encompass the very creation of those options and dilemmas in the first place. Larry's eventual decision to quit Flowercity and become a freelance designer was only a choice for him if he had first made it so, if he had first formed an understanding of the world and of himself that would allow him to envision designing mazes as a live option for who and what he was. Larry's decision about what to pursue, what moved Larry and mattered to him deeply, was a good that must be construed as non-moral: that of designing mazes.

In essence, this model rests on more than the strict evaluation of options: it is the creation of our lives in such a way that we *might* need to make evaluations, or in such a way that we rarely make difficult choices at all. Crucially, the way that these self-interpretations are expressed, like the way the meanings embedded in frameworks are communicated, need not be verbal.

What these suggestions lead to is an account of human agency that is the product of a creative endeavor; we are agents by a nexus of activities in which we all engage that bears closer resemblance to acts of artistic production than to philosophical inquiry and argumentation. While we seek to forge lives that have meaning for us, the choices we make about what matters need not be moral choices, and need not stem from the discovery of some overarching truth that commands us. Many of us

muddle along in a more modest way than this but have a strong sense of identity nonetheless.

Conclusion

At stake in the U.N. report is human flourishing. Safeguarding cultural liberties is essential to that flourishing, not because they bring us pleasure or expand consumer choice but because they directly impact on our ability to forge a sense of identity so crucial to the very operation of agency itself. Standard attributive accounts of agency are based on some property, like rationality, that we all have, all have in the same way, and all retain barring some unfortunate accident. Descriptions of flourishing are "external" to these attributes—wealth, happiness, nutrition, and so on impact on human well being but not on the human attribute of rationality itself. The advances made by the U.N. this year revolve around a more complex understanding of agency, such as the one I have presented here. While we cannot fail to interpret and express (again, barring accident), we can fail to make any sense of our lives or of our place in the world, and we can be barred from making the free choices, allegiances, and decisions that this drive this conception of agency. Such failures, and such restrictions, will cause us to fail to flourish as assuredly as starvation or oppression would. The factors that contribute to human flourishing are in this way *internal* to what it means to be an agent; agency is fragile even while it is a condition of human well being.

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Notes

1. The 2004 *Human Development Report*, launched July 14, 2004, is published online at www.hdr.undp.org. Hereafter cited internally as HDR.
2. "The Moral Topography of the Self," *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory: Interpretive Perspectives on Personality, Psychotherapy and Psychopathology*, eds. Stanley B. Messer et. al. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 299. Hereafter cited internally as MTS.
3. "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Hereafter cited internally as SIA.

4. *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). See Chapter 1, "Inescapable Frameworks." Hereafter cited internally as SS.
5. "Introduction," in *Human Agency and Language*, 4.
6. *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), 28; and see the last chapter of *Sources of the Self*, "The Conflicts of Modernity."
7. "The Concept of a Person," in *Human Agency and Language*, 98.
8. See "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language*, 16–27. Hereafter cited internally as HA.
9. "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 53. Hereafter cited internally as EPR.
10. "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LIV, No.1 (March, 1994), 205.
11. Wallace Shawn, *The Fever* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 7.
12. This expression and this example are from David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 144. McNaughton uses them in the context of a discussion of evil and amorality as challenges to moral realism.
13. In "What is Human Agency?" (15, 16, 18), Taylor relies on Frankfurt's distinction between first- and second-order desires; see Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11–25, especially 12; cited internally as ICA). Taylor's description of human beings as those to whom things matter follows Frankfurt's discussion of what is vitally important to us in "The Importance of What We Care About" in the same volume.
14. This is the topic addressed in "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Hereafter cited internally as ISM.

15. Think, for example, of money—an abstract idea that has less physical instantiation now than ever before but that is so "real" as to control much of society and much of the lives of individuals. Money, however, is one thing that does cross cultural boundaries, although this may just be evidence of the power of this intersubjectively understood construction.
16. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 433.
17. Nelson Goodman, "Just the Facts, Ma'am," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. M. Krausz (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), 83–4.
18. Ibid., 84. See a discussion of this in Michael Krausz, "Is There a Reality Beyond Interpretation?", a paper delivered at Queen's University, October 1997.
19. Ibid., p.81.
20. Gadamer, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 55.
21. Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 38.
22. Krausz, "Is There a Reality Beyond Interpretation?"
23. Ibid., 17, 52. Taylor acknowledges Alasdair MacIntyre as the originator of this metaphor. See *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 203–4.
24. See *Sources of the Self*, 63–73 for a full definition and discussion of hypergoods.
25. Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.
26. Frederick Olafson, "Comments on *Sources of the Self* by Charles Taylor," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. LIV, no. 1 (March 1994), 193.

27. From *Sources of the Self*, 160; cited by Olafson, 194.
28. "Reply and Re-articulation," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, 213.
29. Ibid., 214.
30. Taylor's discussion of Romanticism can be found in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Chapter One, especially 15–21.
31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp.12–3. Cited hereafter as *WP*. Walter Kaufmann, in the Introduction to *The Will to Power*, cautions the reader that these notes do not present Nietzsche's final views. They are, rather, a glimpse into "the workshop of a great thinker" (xvi). This does not mean that these jottings ought to be ignored, however. The quote here comes from 1888, Nietzsche's last active year, but the sentiments expressed in this passage are familiar enough from other works. See, for instance, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), Chapters 3 and 4; *The Gay Science*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181; and the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, where he writes that man is "a rope over an abyss" (126, and the Prologue, 115–20).
32. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 128–31.
33. Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 150.
34. Carol Shields, *Larry's Party* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997), 8. Hereafter cited as *LP*.