

Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition

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There are various ways of defining hermeneutics.¹ The word derives from the Greek hermeneuein – to interpret – and according to the standard definition, hermeneutics is the theory or art of interpreting texts. Hermeneutics, so understood, evolved as a distinct field of enquiry in response to specific interpretative disputes. The question of how to interpret the bible correctly gave rise to a tradition of biblical hermeneutics; traditions of legal hermeneutics arose to provide guidance in the interpretation of written law; and literary hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of works of ‘literature’ in general, however that is defined. It would not be too far off the mark to say that within these contexts -- in theological, legal, and literary studies -- the term hermeneutics is associated with the theory and practice of sound exegesis.

The term has a quite different signification in contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Sometimes it is used to signify a cluster of epistemological problems relating to the validity or objectivity of textual interpretation and translation. Hermeneutics, in this sense, is a region of philosophical inquiry, a more or less self-contained source of philosophical puzzlement. Confusingly, hermeneutics is also a label used to designate a particular stance on these issues, one that rejects the idea that interpretations admit of objectivity, or at least objectivity in its fully-blown form, at all. The term hermeneutics is also commonly employed in discussions of methodology in the social sciences. A social science is said to be hermeneutic if it follows the ‘interpretative method’, if it proceeds by way of ‘interpretations’, and hermeneutic philosophy of social science demarcates the social sciences from the natural sciences on account of their interpretative procedure. Since it disclaims the kind of objectivity attained in the natural sciences, hermeneutics is routinely associated with relativism in the social sciences.²

While it is true that Taylor has done important work clarifying and defending the role of interpretation in social science,³ his core interests and intellectual commitments barely touch on hermeneutics in any of the senses just mentioned. He has very little to say about the principles of sound textual exegesis, he is only marginally concerned with issues of ‘poetics’ or ‘literary hermeneutics’, and he has never shown much enthusiasm for elaborating a technically detailed hermeneutic or interpretative ‘methodology’. To get to the sense in which Taylor does propound a hermeneutic philosophy, we need to think of hermeneutics differently: we need to ask, in the first instance, what interpretations are interpretations of; and secondly, with an answer to this question in mind, we need to reflect on what interpretation tells us about human existence.

Meaning and being

The answer to the question ‘what are interpretations of?’ is, of course, meanings: things that are in some manner, in some degree, meaningful. Only meaningful things, or things that have prima facie or potential meaning, need to be interpreted, and the aim of the interpretation is to bring out that meaning or make it more vivid. But what really falls under the category of things that contain or express a meaning? Modern science challenges the idea that physical systems or entities do. It makes the existence of some physical object, or the happening of some physical event, intelligible as the outcome of a causal, mechanical process rather than as a signifier of anything. Perhaps, then, it is mental objects or events – i.e. thoughts – that are the true bearers of meaning. But to the extent that mental phenomena are also ultimately answerable to the mechanistic laws discovered by science, the mind seems to fare no better. And if meaning belongs to neither mind nor matter, the suspicion can easily arise that there is something ontologically or metaphysically ‘queer’ about it, that there is no room for meaning in our

best accounts of existence and reality.⁴ Modern naturalism embraces this thought, and seeks to explain all phenomena, irrespective of the meaning they appear to contain, as if they fell under the kind of categories employed in the modern sciences of nature.

Naturalism has been challenged by several strands of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. A common theme in these anti-naturalistic movements has been an insistence on the irreducible normativity of thought and action. The basic idea here is that thoughts and actions are subject to norms, rules, or reasons, on account of which they have a different kind of intelligibility to the causally determined happenings of nature. Unlike phenomena that are ‘natural’ on account of being intelligible in the latter way – that is, as objects of natural science -- thoughts and actions can be correct or incorrect, valid or invalid, true or false, right or wrong, and so forth. Many different accounts have been offered about what gives rise to this normativity, or as it is sometimes put, what the ‘sources of normativity’ are.⁵ But most modern anti-naturalisms share the conviction – first formulated by Kant -- that the source is intrinsically connected to structures of human subjectivity or intersubjectivity rather than some human-independent, transcendent or ‘supernatural’ order of Ideas. And amongst the philosophers who have taken this path, some (though by no means all⁶) have argued that normativity has its roots in what it is like to be a subject: they have argued that thought and action owe their distinctive form of intelligibility to the mode of existence they give expression to.

By far the most important philosopher to have argued along these lines is Heidegger. For Heidegger, the normativity of thought and action has its basis in our ‘being-in-the-world’ (see Heidegger, 1962 [1927]). He tried to show that even the most abstract norm-guided practices, such as doing epistemology, are in a philosophically very important sense grounded in the concrete concerns of mundane existence. Furthermore, as these concerns have to be interpreted, we must regard the capacity for interpretation as an

irreducible existential structure. What it is to be human depends on how this capacity is exercised: in the course of interpreting its fundamental concerns, a human existence (Dasein) becomes what it distinctively is. In other words, human existence is constituted by the meanings things have for it, meanings determined more or less explicitly by self-interpretations. Who I am, as a subject or person, depends on what is meaningful or what is an issue for me; and even before I know it, my identity is shaped by the way those concerns and issues are interpreted. With this move, hermeneutics took its so-called ‘ontological turn’: interpretation is conceived fundamentally as a natural human capacity which at once makes human existence a set of possibilities and circumscribes those possibilities within a horizon of finitude. And only now are we talking about hermeneutics in a sense that touches decisively on Taylor’s core philosophical concerns.

When Taylor expresses his affinity with and indebtedness to the tradition of ‘post-Heideggerian hermeneutics’ (Taylor, 1985a: 3) he is aligning himself with what he takes to be its central thesis: that human beings are ‘self-interpreting animals’ (ibid.: 45). In fact, the thesis that human beings are self-interpreting animals presupposes a more fundamental one: that human existence is expressive of and constituted by meanings shaped by self-interpretations. It is worth noting that the more fundamental thesis belongs not just to the post-Heideggerian hermeneutics of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Taylor, but also to the post-Heideggerian existential phenomenology exemplified by the likes of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Merleau-Ponty is a key influence on Taylor – certainly more important than Dilthey and probably more so than Gadamer (the names most often associated with hermeneutics) -- and it is important, when locating Taylor in the hermeneutic tradition, to bear this in mind. For an unfortunate consequence of defining hermeneutics exclusively in terms of interpretation is that it can keep from view the crucial dimension of pre-interpreted, pre-reflexive meaning explored by Merleau-Ponty and other existential

phenomenologists.⁷ It is meaning, not the reflective act of interpretation, and meaning in relation to human existence rather than to literary texts, that is first in the order of Taylor's concerns, and it must be our point of departure for thinking about Taylor as a hermeneutic philosopher.

In the remainder of this essay I shall try to show how the theme of meaning-constitution in relation to human subjectivity runs like a red thread through Taylor's work on epistemology, philosophy of language and ethics. Just as epistemology is of concern to Taylor on account of what it has to say, if often only implicitly, about what it is like to be a subject or agent who knows, so Taylor's philosophy of language is directed at the issue of what it is to be a linguistic being. The same holds for ethics, and indeed politics, which Taylor treats first and foremost as a dimension of human subjectivity, that is, in terms of self-defining human capacities, developed in plural and contingent ways across history and between cultures, that need to be examined as such through a kind of hermeneutic reflection. While my task here is primarily expository, I shall also draw attention to issues that are commonly regarded as weak points for the hermeneutic tradition Taylor identifies with, and I shall consider whether Taylor is any more successful when dealing with these issues himself.

The knowing subject

As I mentioned above, the idea that there is something ontologically or metaphysically 'queer' about meaning comes naturally to a mode of thought that divides the world into an 'outer realm' of physical facts and an 'inner realm' of mental ones. An important feature of the hermeneutic attempt to rehabilitate meaning as an indispensable category for understanding what it is to be human is to identify and dismantle the motivations for carving up the world this way. Along with other hermeneutic philosophers, Taylor

maintains that one of the most potent motivations is epistemological: the inner-outer sorting is driven in no small measure by a certain conception of what it is to know.⁸ He then argues that this is a faulty conception, and that understood aright the knowing subject inhabits a realm of meaning – is part of a meaningful world -- that is in no way mysterious, ‘queer’ or spooky.

Let us first briefly consider perceptual knowledge. Taylor follows Merleau-Ponty in taking perception to be our primary access to the world. We perceive before we reflect, theorise, or judge. And if we are to understand what it is to be a perceiving subject, we must first be able to describe how things appear to the subject prior to reflection and judgement. If we do that, as Merleau-Ponty does in an exemplary manner in his phenomenology of perception,⁹ we are reminded of a world in which particular things are always only partially disclosed, which invariably point beyond themselves to other things, and which serve as points of orientation for the subject’s activity. The particulars of this perceptual, pre-objective world ‘announce more than they contain’ – they signify – and they signify informatively in a way that relates to the desires and purposes of the perceiver. Perceptual knowledge is thus a form of ‘agent’s knowledge’ (Taylor 1995: 10). Perception is inseparable from a dealing, coping or engagement with things. As such, the content of perception is non-contingently related to the world in which the perceiving, knowing subject is embodied. And since perception is our primary mode of access to the world, the predicament of knowing subjects is never entirely free of its agent structure.

This way of thinking about perception stands in stark contrast to the classical Cartesian and Lockean doctrines of the mind, which Taylor is convinced are paradigmatic not just for a whole range of positions in contemporary philosophy of mind but also for modern ‘common sense’ understandings. According to the classical doctrines, the mind is furnished by ‘ideas’ that form the building blocks of knowledge. For Lockean

empiricism, ideas derive from perceptual ‘impressions’, or as more recent empiricism puts it, ‘sensory data’, that can be picked out and thematised by sober, disengaged philosophical-scientific reflection. While Descartes had a different, more intellectualist view of the source of these ideas, he too thought of mental contents as neutral, self-contained units of information which, when suitably processed, could yield objective knowledge of the world. Knowledge thus seemed to have its basis in discrete, separably identifiable ‘mental’ items or representations, which are self-contained in the sense that they are only contingently connected to the world disclosed to an engaged point of view. Taylor points out, along with Merleau-Ponty and others, that as a phenomenology of mind this account is totally inadequate. ‘Ideas’, ‘impressions’ and ‘sensory data’ are static, reified entities that bear very little resemblance to lived experience. But Taylor also owes an account of how the classical theorists could go so wrong in their phenomenology. And his answer is that the classical picture transposes aspects of the high-level, reflective procedures for generating objective knowledge onto the very nature of the perceiving subject. The method of analysing a complex phenomenon into simple components, treating them as neutral bits of information, and rationally reprocessing them, is written into ‘the mind’ itself. This ‘ontologizing of rational procedure’ (Taylor, 1995: 61) explains how something as phenomenologically implausible as the classical accounts of perception could ever hold sway. A picture of what it is to know obscures our understanding of what it is like to be a perceiver.

Furthermore, the picture is a dangerously incomplete model of knowledge itself, and not just because it rests on an impoverished phenomenology of perceptual experience. The reason, according to Taylor, is that it fails to acknowledge the conditions of possibility of objective knowledge, that is, its transcendental conditions. It is undeniable, Taylor thinks, that human beings do have a capacity for generating objective

representations of the world. We possess knowledge that takes this objective form. But this mode of knowing can only arise against a ‘background’ of concerns that cannot itself be the object of such knowledge. The fundamental mistake of the classical doctrine – which persists in contemporary ‘naturalistic’ approaches to knowledge – is to suppose that the background is merely a causal antecedent of our cognitions. If that were the case, then the background would itself be as amenable to cognitive representation as any object within it. The problem with this construction, however, is that it confuses a transcendental condition of knowledge with a causal-empirical one; or rather, it fails to acknowledge that there is an issue about transcendental conditions for epistemology to address as well as an issue about the mechanisms of representation. The background is a transcendental condition of knowledge in the sense that it is required for the intelligibility of the knowledge claims we make. It cannot be completely objectified (or represented), since any objective knowledge claimed of it, to be intelligible at all, must itself have a ‘background’ presupposition -- precisely what complete objectification would annul. This transcendental level of reflection, therefore, exposes limits to the objectifiable, representable world. This is how Taylor interprets the epistemological significance of Heidegger’s (and Gadamer’s) reclamation of human finitude. For Taylor, as for other thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition, finitude is an inescapable structure of human knowledge; a point we need reminding of in view of widely held presumptions about the in-principle limitlessness of objective enquiry, which in turn reflect a blindness to the transcendental issue of intelligibility.

The claim so far has been that our knowledge of the objective world is only intelligible when set against a background of practically oriented perceptual awareness. Our primary sense of reality is bound up with our being in the world, and without this sense representational cognitions of nature would be impossible. Essentially the same

point holds, according to Taylor, for our knowledge of the human world. That is to say, for Taylor the human sciences as much as the natural sciences are grounded in a pre-reflective, practically structured grasp of reality. But whereas the natural sciences refine the pre-objective sense of reality by depicting nature from a subject-neutral point of view, this strategy is unsuitable for deepening our knowledge or understanding of the human world. For meaning-content and subject-relatedness is integral to the very notion of human activity. Human activity is by its very nature directed by desires and purposes – without them, we wouldn't have actions to understand or explain -- and interpreting these desires and purposes is an essential part of reaching an understanding or explanation of the activity. For the most part, we understand the meaning of actions in a pre-reflective, pre-theoretical manner. The distinctive aim of the human sciences, according to Taylor, is to improve upon these shared pre-theoretical interpretations that arise spontaneously within a lifeworld, without ever completely cancelling them out, and without abandoning their interpretative form. The task of a science like anthropology, for instance, is to advance the prevailing understandings of the purposes expressed in a particular culture. Taylor draws heavily on Gadamer's notion of a 'fusion of horizons' to explicate this learning process.¹⁰ And in doing so, he contributes to the clarification of the hermeneutic claim that the social sciences have an 'interpretative logic' that departs in key ways from the logic of the natural sciences.

Let us now briefly consider some of the main criticisms that are commonly made against the hermeneutic approach to knowledge. Perhaps the most widespread objection is that it is fundamentally an anti-scientific philosophical outlook, and, at bottom, irrationalist. This objection can take several forms. First, it is often thought that hermeneutics is sceptical about the competence of modern science, as if science was incapable – according to the hermeneutic standpoint -- of delivering genuine, objective

knowledge of anything. Heidegger's talk of science as emerging from a 'background' of practical concerns is seen as an objection to the validity of scientific theories, since it seems to present those theories as contingent or relative to the background. If so, what makes science superior to, or more justified than, any other kind of practical engagement with the world? If natural science is ultimately just one way of dealing with the world amongst others, what authority does it really hold? Thinkers who put the issue in such terms tend to view the hermeneutic notion of the background as an avatar of what Popper termed the 'myth of the framework'; that is, the misconstrual of scientific knowledge as relative to a particular 'framework', 'paradigm', or 'language game' (Popper 1970: 56). However, this objection seriously misrepresents the motivation behind the hermeneutic invocation of the background and Taylor does a service to the hermeneutic tradition by pointing out why. For far from casting doubt on the objectivity of science, the 'background' argument is intended as an articulation of the conditions of possibility of the knowledge we do in fact have. It is not a sceptical argument at all. On the contrary, it is used to bolster a 'realist' theory of science, one that attributes the success of scientific theories to their ability to locate the causal powers that really do inhere in objects.¹¹ If anything, it is the positivist and falsificationist philosophies of science, rather than hermeneutics, that short-change the explanatory competence of scientific theories.

Hermeneutics is also accused of being anti-scientific or irrationalist on account of the limits it draws to objective knowledge. On the one hand, the criticism is made that the 'background' is artificially and arbitrarily excluded from scientific scrutiny. Again, however, this objection rests on a misunderstanding. For to say that objective knowledge is transcendently conditioned by the background – that the background is required for knowledge claims to be intelligible -- is to say nothing whatsoever about where, as a matter of fact, the empirical limits of scientific knowledge lie. On the other hand, the

objection is often put that hermeneutics imposes arbitrary restrictions on the use of objective methods in the human sciences. Taylor's own account of the logic of the social sciences has been the target of such criticism.¹² Suffice it to note here that while Taylor has not elaborated in any detail the procedures by which interpretative social theories earn their claim to validity, it is consistent with his hermeneutic stance for him to doubt that there is much of worth to be said on this issue – at least by way of formal methodological rules -- without abandoning a commitment to the distinction between validity and non-validity in the social sciences as such. If, as his critics allege, Taylor is an interpretative sceptic, he is a sceptic about the merits of formalism in the human sciences rather than validity in them.

Naturalists are not the only ones to object to the hermeneutic epistemology of the social sciences. There is also the camp of what could loosely be called 'critical' social theorists. According to the standard classification, critical social theory is in the business not just of explaining (like natural science) nor interpreting the world (like hermeneutics), but of transforming it.¹³ The ultimate goal of social theory, according to the critical model, is emancipation. But the standard classification is misleading. This is because hermeneutic social science, as Taylor understands it, itself has the goal of emancipation in view, and its emancipatory power is integral to whatever validity it rightfully claims. According to Taylor, at their best social theories serve as 'self-definitions': they reflect the purposes which the knowing agent, or the society in which the agent is embedded, takes as fundamental (Taylor, 1985b). They also orient agents in their pursuit of their self-defining goals. By clarifying the conditions that have to be in place for these purposes to be more fully realised, and by clarifying the meaning of the purposes themselves, social theory can help bring about, in a more complete manner, the 'selves' they define. And in successfully doing this – in helping to shape a self-formative process – they emancipate.

Admittedly, such ‘self-realisation’ may not be what other critical theorists have in mind when they refer to emancipation. But then the argument becomes a dispute about the meaning of emancipation, freedom, and kindred notions, rather than an argument between hermeneutics and an opposed ‘critical’ conception of the ends of social science.

The linguistic turn

Philosophical hermeneutics is closely associated with the ‘linguistic turn’ in twentieth-century philosophy. For Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, as well as non-hermeneutic philosophers also linked with the linguistic turn (such as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Derrida), a chief (if not the chief) challenge facing philosophy is to think about language the right way: if we go wrong here, at best philosophical reflection will be fruitless, at worst (and more likely) it will be a source of grievous illusion. Taylor agrees. But more explicitly than his fellow hermeneutic philosophers, Taylor presents the challenge of thinking about language in the right way as a task for philosophical anthropology. At the core of the linguistic turn, as Taylor interprets it, is the proposition ‘that the question of language is somehow strategic for the question of human nature, that man is above all the language animal’ (Taylor 1985a: 216). Taylor’s investigations into language are guided by the conviction that we must first think about language in the right way if we are really to grasp what it is to be human, and that if we go astray in the former endeavour, we will grievously misconstrue the kind of being we are. While this conviction certainly fits comfortably within post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, it is more prominent in Taylor than in other hermeneutic thinkers, and it contributes to the distinctive voice Taylor has within the hermeneutic tradition.

Of course, human beings are not the only living species to use language, and a philosophy of language that has the strategic importance hermeneutics attaches to it must

recognise both the continuity that exists between the human and other forms of life, and the role language plays in differentiating the human life-form. Taylor notes that at a rudimentary, cross-specific level, language functions as a mechanism for co-ordinating behaviour and as a mechanism for primitive socialisation.¹⁴ By emitting and responding to signals, animals convey information to each other in ways that are beneficial to the survival of the species as a whole. Higher animals (including humans) are also able to bond together into groups by communicative means. In both these cases, Taylor maintains, language serves some non-linguistically defined purpose. Language, at this level, is intelligible just in terms of biological imperatives; its intelligibility is not dependent on standards that are internal to language itself. But this changes once we move into what Taylor calls the ‘semantic dimension’ (Taylor 1995: 103). At this level of language use, it becomes possible to talk about the ‘rightness’ of linguistic expressions. That is to say, a linguistic expression, when operative within the semantic dimension, is subject to norms. And it is only when the use of linguistic expressions is governed by norms that the issue of their meaning or significance arises, as distinct from their causal role. ‘Success’ in the semantic dimension is not a matter of being causally instrumental in bringing about some non-linguistically defined end, but of being right, of satisfying a standard internal to language, in whatever manner is appropriate. While the semantic dimension has its genesis in non-human uses of language – it realises a potential that is already there in animal life -- it exhibits a distinct mode of intelligibility. For Taylor, to acknowledge this qualitative shift is to take the first crucial step towards understanding how language and the distinctively human form of life are related.

The second step is to appreciate the full range of norms, or the many ways of ‘getting things right’, within the semantic dimension. We need to be alert to this, Taylor thinks, in view of the prevalence of what he terms ‘designative’ theories in modern

philosophy of language and the taken for granted assumptions such theories build on.¹⁵

Designative theories accept that language is normative – they agree that there is a qualitative difference between getting something right in language and participating in some causal chain – but the normativity they recognise has just one source: truth as the correspondence between a representation or literal description and its object. That is to say, it is the norm of designation, of the ability of a word or sentence to designate or represent an object or state of affairs, that enables words or sentences to mean something. Getting things right in language is thus essentially a matter of having the designative function in order. But Taylor is convinced that this is a much too narrow view of the semantic dimension. We are able to ‘get things right’ in language in a host of ways – for instance by articulating a feeling properly, by evoking the right mood, or by establishing an appropriate inter-personal relation – many of which are not at all a matter of designating things. Furthermore, unlike the designative use of language, these forms of language use are not ‘about’ something that stands independently of the articulation itself. Taylor is impressed by the fact that an articulation can constitute the emotion, or mood, or social relation it expresses. New kinds of feeling and sociality are brought into being through language. But this does not prevent such modes of articulation from being right (when they are right). In other words, there are forms of language use that are constitutive and productive of their objects, and productive in a way that is ‘true to’ or ‘right’ for them. Inevitably, Taylor points out, such forms of articulation get screened off within the designative paradigm.

Creatures whose feelings, actions, and social relations are constituted by the ways they are articulated in language are in a clear sense ‘self-interpreting animals’: what they are as animals – the quality of their experience, the ways they act, and how they behave together – is inseparable from how they interpret themselves. For Taylor, this is the core

truth of philosophical hermeneutics. In order to be able to articulate this truth, hermeneutics must obviously have access to a more expansive theory of meaning than the designative one. But Taylor, in line with other hermeneutic theorists, does not simply claim that the expressive/constitutive capacity of language sits alongside the designative capacity. The claim is that the power of expression – the power of disclosing and constituting a human ‘world’ -- is fundamental and originary. The capacity of language to designate things is one amongst a series of possibilities imminent to the power of expression itself. Theories that put designation first in the order of intelligibility, in Taylor’s view, suffer from a parallel flaw to the representationalist epistemology we considered earlier. Just as the rational processing of neutral input has its genesis and intelligibility-condition in agent-knowledge, so neutral talk about objects, or true descriptions of states of affairs, draws on a prior, more fundamental capacity for expression, which is ‘always already’ in place whenever we describe literally, neutrally and accurately. Taylor thus draws attention to an insight which is crucial to the hermeneutic tradition but which, perhaps more than anything else, baffles and bewilders anti-hermeneutic philosophers, especially those working in the analytic tradition: the equiprimordiality of normativity and productive world-disclosure. For hermeneutics, language is at once and indivisibly the medium through which we think about the world (the semantic dimension in which truth and other norms hold sway) and the medium through which we create a world. According to Taylor’s hermeneutic theory of meaning, literal truth and plain-speaking prose domesticate, without ever eliminating, primordial expressive powers.

If one looks at Taylor’s work on language from the perspective of recent Anglo-American analytic philosophy, one is likely be as disappointed about what Taylor does not say as perplexed by what he does. Taylor has written very little about this issues that

take centre stage in mainstream philosophy of language in the English-speaking world. For instance, there is no worked-out ‘theory of reference’ in Taylor’s writings, and there is hardly any account of the ‘pragmatics’ of speech that many contemporary philosophers take to be decisive for the theory of meaning. It is notable that, unlike Ricoeur and some other contemporary hermeneutic thinkers, Taylor is downbeat about Donald Davidson’s seminal work in philosophy of language, and certainly Taylor shows little inclination to contribute to the debates Davidson initiated.¹⁶ This is because, in Taylor’s view (and here Taylor is closer to Gadamer than Ricoeur) such debates fail to focus on the philosophically crucial issue: the nature of the expressive power. The debates which do focus on this issue, Taylor shows, occur not in analytic philosophy of language, but in and between the ‘post-Romantic’ traditions of Continental philosophy. Taylor has constructed an intriguing and helpful map for finding our way about in these debates.¹⁷ He distinguishes, for instance, between various types of subjectivism and anti-subjectivism regarding the expressive power, whatever is made manifest in it, and the subject or agent responsible for bringing the expression about. On all these issues, Taylor, along with the late Heidegger and Gadamer, commends the anti-subjectivist stance. While Taylor’s commendations may not always be backed up with as much argument as one would wish – his polemic with Derrida is a case in point – Taylor has at least shown that there are arguments here to be made, and that they are well worth making wherever one stands in the debate.¹⁸

Taylor thus contrasts the hermeneutic theory of meaning he shares with Heidegger and Gadamer with the designative theories popular amongst analytic philosophers on the one hand, and subjectivist constructions of the expressive power in Continental philosophy on the other. For Taylor, these are not just different approaches to language: they also, if sometimes only implicitly, come packaged with different theories of human

nature. At first sight Taylor's view might seem far-fetched: can't one take the designative relation between language and the world to be decisive for the theory of meaning without getting embroiled in controversies about human nature? Taylor's view becomes less implausible, however, when one considers that a philosophy of language cannot be neutral with regard to human nature. After all, the very idea of 'self-interpreting animals' cannot even be formulated within a theory of meaning that has no room for the expressive or constitutive power of language -- hardly a neutral outcome from an anthropological point of view. But Taylor's claim is in fact stronger than this: it is not just that designative theories are not neutral about human nature, such theories actually give positive support to a rival, anti-expressive anthropology of their own. Taylor here brings out some often neglected features of the early modern theories of meaning that continue to shape contemporary debates. The classical designative theories, Taylor shows, were driven by a powerful ideal of self-transparency and instrumental freedom. They presented language as a tool or resource which human beings potentially have the freedom to do with as they will. On this account, humans are not only capable of manipulating and reshaping language according to their own designs and purposes; they have a responsibility to achieve such mastery and control, for otherwise they are led into error and illusion about the world and themselves. The classical designative theories depicted non-designative elements as sources of such error and bewitchment, and thus as hindrances to the subject's self-defining instrumental freedom. Taylor is convinced that a disengaged notion of freedom -- or an 'anthropology of disengagement' -- also informs those expressivist theories that take a subjectivist approach to the expressive power.

For non-subjectivist expressivism, by contrast, the fact that human beings are language animals means that they can never achieve full self-possession. The thinking and acting subject is always already situated in the semantic dimension, and so subject to

norms that are in some sense 'given'. The semantic dimension is, in principle, independent of the will and must escape objectification by the will. The constitutive power of language also militates against the ideal of absolute cognitive self-possession. For if there are experiences, feelings and social relations that are constituted by the way we express or interpret them, and these things help define who we are, our self-understanding can never be complete. These features of human existence are not objects waiting to be represented by the right kind of designative language. There is no final, 'self-authenticating' vocabulary for them; and relatedly, there is always more 'meaning' to them than is expressed in any particular self-interpretation. The meaning of human existence insofar as it inhabits the semantic dimension or is constituted by language qua expressive power can never be finalised. In addition, the language of self-interpretation is beyond the individual's control because language has an inherently intersubjective character. The language 'I' speak, if it is to say anything, is always the language of a 'we'. In general, then, we can say that the hermeneutic theory of meaning Taylor sympathetically reconstructs helps articulate a non-voluntarist ontology of human finitude. It at once points to certain defining characteristics of human nature and draws limits to what we can know about ourselves given this nature. In this way, the question of language is strategic for the question of human nature not just for suggesting what human nature is like, but also for revealing the mode of articulation that is suitable for the theory or 'science' of human nature as such.

The moral subject

One of the central issues in the tradition of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics has been the question of its relation to ethics. Notoriously, Heidegger seemed to think that ethics could be left to itself once we situated ourselves properly in relation to Being, or as he also

formulated it in his earlier writings, once we achieved genuine (i.e. 'non-subjectivist') authenticity in our thought and action.¹⁹ If human beings are self-interpreting animals, our natures are not simply given to us. We must assume responsibility for our own existence, and whatever ethical orientation we have is only properly viewed in light of this self-responsibility. To exist authentically, in proper relation to Being, is thus a kind of injunction based in our self-interpreting nature. But whether this insight could back up or justify one ethical orientation amongst others remained unclear. Sartre also drew attention to the unavoidability of taking responsibility for ourselves -- however, in 'bad faith', it might seem otherwise. And while Sartre did acknowledge the need to develop a positive, substantive ethics of authenticity from his hermeneutic point of departure, he was unable to satisfy it.²⁰ The problematic relation between post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and ethics is even more evident in Levinas's work.²¹ Levinas accepts the thesis that human beings are self-interpreting animals, but for him the injunction to become oneself (authentically) is paradoxically fulfilled only in the self-negating stance of being 'for another'. In fact ethics, for Levinas, is not about authenticity at all. It is about giving oneself over to the other human being or 'substituting' for the Other. Levinas is convinced that this relation, rather than the self-relation or the relation to Being, is primordial. But for all Levinas's concern with articulating the 'for-the-other' relation, with 'showing up' the priority of ethics over ontology in a philosophical discourse, it is far from clear how we are to interpret the concrete ethical implications of his hermeneutic endeavour -- if indeed there are any. Like Heidegger and Sartre, Levinas is at most a reluctant 'ethicist', and he is just as averse as them to talk about moral 'values' or 'agency'.

The distinctiveness of Taylor's voice in the hermeneutic tradition owes much to the explicitly moral perspective he brings to the post-Heideggerian thesis that human

beings are self-interpreting animals. We have to bring such a perspective, Taylor argues, because self-interpretations are conducted in languages that cannot but instantiate distinctions of worth. As Taylor puts his claim, ‘our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a 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’ (Taylor 1985: 3). These distinctions are articulated in what Taylor calls ‘strong evaluations’ (ibid.). Now we have already seen that, for Taylor, in important cases our self-understanding constitutes who we are. There are feelings, moods, and social relations that are shaped through the way we articulate or express them. Articulation, once we are in the semantic dimension, is not an arbitrary matter: it is responsive to, or guided by, standards that are normative for the subject. Taylor then points out that amongst the things we articulate this way are our ‘moral’ feelings, for example shame, pride, indignation, dignity, self-respect, injustice and so forth. In Taylor’s view, the norm-guidedness that is necessary for the proper articulation of such feelings is a responsiveness to the categoric worth of the thing at hand. Taylor’s next step is to argue that it is impossible to conceive a recognisably human life lived without some apprehension of the distinction between a thing having such worth or not. If this argument is successful, he will have shown that the articulations that contribute to human self-understanding are necessarily framed by a background set of qualitative distinctions of worth.

Whether or not we do take the argument to be successful,²² we must be careful not to misrepresent the conclusion it purportedly reaches. Taylor’s claim is that human subjectivity has a ‘moral’ dimension on account of its non-contingent connection to frameworks of strong value. The idea is that a human identity is intelligible only in relation to ‘the good’. This has led some critics to argue that Taylor has a ‘moralistic’,

‘intellectualist’ and exaggeratedly ‘linguistic’ conception of the self.²³ The objection is that agents need not define themselves in terms of moral self-interpretations (they can be self-interpreting without being moral or caring much about morality), and they can be moral or concerned by morality without articulating those concerns linguistically (that is, without possessing or exercising an intellectual capacity for reflective articulation). However, the force of the criticism is considerably weakened by the broad way in which Taylor uses the expressions ‘moral’, ‘the good’, and ‘articulation’. All that is needed to have a self or identity constituted by moral concerns is for some desires and purposes to matter on account of their worth. But that worth need not be ‘moral’ in the narrow sense, say, of being dutiful, or altruistic, or benevolent. Likewise, articulations can take a variety of expressive forms, and certainly need not be ‘rationalistic’ or ‘intellectualist’. No doubt Taylor’s employment of the term ‘strong evaluation’ contributed to the confusion over this issue, since the strong evaluator does assume a reflective, rational stance. But strong values can direct a subject’s activity without the mediation of reflection, and indeed it is this pre-reflective, inchoate orientation toward to good that constitutes the ‘moral dimension’ of human subjectivity for the large part. Unless we see that strong value rather than strong evaluation is the decisive feature, Taylor’s hermeneutic conception of the self will indeed seem falsely linguistic, reflective and intellectualist.

Taylor thus extracts a more explicitly moral meaning from the insight that human beings are self-interpreting animals than other thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition. He makes a parallel move in his appropriation of the hermeneutic idea that narratives are crucial to human identity. Drawing on Heidegger’s famous analysis of the temporal structure of Dasein, Taylor argues that self-understanding is impossible without some grasp of how the self unfolds in time, of how it constitutes a temporal totality.²⁴ Self-interpretation must bring past, present and future together, a synthesis that only narratives

can achieve. For Taylor, we must not think of this synthesis as separate from the frameworks of strong value that articulate distinctions of worth; rather, we should think of the synthesis as disclosing possibilities for the meaning of a life as a whole. Self-interpretation thus requires some temporal framework within which the direction of a life in relation to the good can be articulated. At this point Taylor imports aspects of MacIntyre's account of human life as a 'quest' (see MacIntyre 1984: 219). As self-interpreters and thus also self-narrators, we find ourselves having to make sense of our lives as a sequence of 'maturation and regressions, overcomings and defeats' (Taylor 1989a: 50) in realising the good. However, it is arguable that this is one step too many in the passage from hermeneutics to moral ontology. Ricoeur suggests so: he draws attention to significant disanalogies between the unity of a good life, a life gathered together as a singular totality, and the narrative unity of a piece of fiction.²⁵ And Taylor himself equivocates on the matter when he acknowledges the power of narrative (particularly in modernist literature) to subvert the very notions of unity and identity on which the conception of life as a 'quest' seems to rest.²⁶

The hermeneutic provenance of Taylor's conception of practical reason, however, is beyond dispute. Like Heidegger, and especially Gadamer before him, Taylor is hugely impressed by Aristotle's thinking on this topic (see Aristotle, 1980). For Aristotle, practical reason is fundamentally a matter of being sensitive or responsive to the ethical demands of a particular situation. While a natural capacity, this sensitivity or responsiveness is acquired through socialisation into a form of life. In the course of our socialisation, we develop characters, a sense of self, and a way of seeing the world that enables us to tell the difference between correct and incorrect modes of conduct. This difference is not something that can be discerned independently of our socialised, and so historically mediated, practical point of view. And it is not something that can be

established by purely theoretical inquiry. Rather, when reasoning about practical matters we have to work with the inherited language and norms we share with similarly socialised subjects, and rely on our judgement about what is appropriate to the given situation. For Gadamer, this focus on judgement and application enabled Aristotle to avoid the abstract formalism that afflicts modern approaches to practical reason, and it also provides the focus of Gadamer's own approach (see Gadamer, 1993 [1960] and 1999). While Taylor shares Gadamer's dissatisfaction with moral formalism, Taylor's Aristotelian alternative takes a rather different direction. Less informed by the tradition of legal hermeneutics than Gadamer, and more concerned by issues in moral psychology, Taylor's priority is to make better sense of the link between practical reason and motivation rather than to reinstate the humanist paradigm of judgement.²⁷ He does this by proposing that practical reason involves transitions in the interpretation of motivationally potent, identity-expressive strong values.²⁸ The practical judgement favoured by reason, according to Taylor, is an interpretation of the good that compares favourably with the interpretation we began with. The justification is not done by a formalisable procedure – such as the maximisation of general happiness or the universalisation of a maxim – as modern formalist theories claim. Rather it is done by the content of the strong value as revealed by the better interpretation. Furthermore, that content is not abstracted from the motivational set of the practical reasoner -- otherwise a further reason would be needed to make the reasoning matter to the agent -- since strong values are integral to the subject's sense of self. Admittedly, it follows that practical reason has a limited scope: it is always addressed from and to particular lived points of view. And because of this, it is powerless when faced either with the sceptic who claims not to have a strongly evaluated starting point at all, or with the dogmatist who believes that his starting point is immune from the possibility of reflective revision and improvement.

For some philosophers however, particularly those in the Kantian tradition, a more serious drawback in Taylor's hermeneutic model of practical reason is that it does not distinguish between the kind of validity possessed by a soundly interpreted strong value and the kind of validity possessed by a legitimate moral principle. Kantians such as Habermas want to uphold a distinction of this sort in order to preserve the intuition that there are some norms – strictly speaking 'moral' ones – that apply to all of us, irrespective of the 'ethical' values we identify with.²⁹ In short, the idea is that moral duties and obligations are both universal and uniquely binding on us; that we have, for instance, a duty to respect other people's basic rights whatever personal aspirations we (or they) may uphold, and that this duty ought to override those aspirations. Thus while the 'ethical' use of practical reason, as Taylor shows, is a matter of 'hermeneutic self-clarification', Habermas argues that its 'moral use' involves a different kind of procedure: the testing of a norm for its universalisability. The participants in practical reason in this sense must abstract from their conception of the good (their strong values) in order to test the validity of claims about what 'morality' as such requires. Practical reason can thus be used to settle conflicts arising between people with rival strong values – to settle them on strictly speaking moral grounds -- and it can be used to criticise forms of life that fail to respect basic principles of justice.

It is hard to argue with Habermas's point that Taylor's model of practical reason as 'hermeneutic self-clarification' is better suited to some practical circumstances than others. Certainly, it does little to explicate what a fair or impartial resolution of a practical dispute requires – not a negligible shortcoming for many moral theorists.³⁰ However, Taylor does provide a response to the criticism that a hermeneutic approach to ethics is unable to make sense of the peculiar binding force of moral demands. For Taylor, the injunctions to treat other people as 'ends' and not 'means', to respect basic human rights,

and to minimise suffering rightly take precedence over other values in the modern world. And it is important that a conception of ethics be able to articulate this priority of the 'right' over the 'good'. But rather than do this by abstracting the right from the good, and by demarcating a logically distinct realm of 'morality', Taylor urges us to consider autonomy, universal justice and the minimisation of suffering as 'hypergoods'; that is, 'higher-order' goods from the standpoint of which judgements about other goods becomes possible (Taylor 1989a 63). 'Moral' values, according to Taylor, owe their peculiar stature not to some putatively unique proximity to the structure of agency, language, or reason, but on the one hand to the anthropological fact that values of that kind are crucial for stabilising social relations everywhere, and on the other to the historical fact that in modern societies they matter to people enormously. 'Morality' in its strict sense is thus one expression -- albeit fundamental -- of the modern identity. In line with the hermeneutic tradition Taylor thereby 'historicises' the moral subject. But this by no means implies that the historically contingent standards that define the modern subject cannot be rationally redeemed. And just as important, it does nothing to protect those standards from being the object of rational criticism themselves.

This raises a number of issues about whether hermeneutics can provide a suitable standpoint from which to give a philosophical critique of oppressive or alienating practices. I believe that it can, and that in general it can help justify and especially sustain a progressive politics. I also think that Taylor, more than anyone else in the hermeneutic tradition, shows us why. Unfortunately I do not have space to explore these issues, which would require a discussion of Taylor's social and political theory in relation to that of other hermeneutic thinkers.³¹ In this essay I have only tried to indicate the hermeneutic provenance of Taylor's thinking about knowledge, language and ethics, and I have

suggested some ways in which Taylor's thinking on these matters makes a distinctive contribution to the hermeneutic tradition.

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Notes

¹ For a more detailed account of the various ways of defining hermeneutics than the one sketched here, see Palmer (1969).

² On the complex of cultural and philosophical associations between hermeneutics and relativism, see Gellner (1985).

³ See especially 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', in Taylor (1985b).

⁴ On this idea of metaphysical 'queerness', see Mackie (1977).

⁵ The currency of this expression is largely due to Christine Korsgaard's use of it (see Korsgaard: 1996), which in fact differs from meaning I intend to convey here.

⁶ Recent scholarship suggests that Hegelian Idealism and Pragmatism should be read as developing this post-Kantian theme in a different direction. See for instance Pippin (1989) and Brandom (1994).

⁷ I certainly do not mean to suggest here that either Dilthey or Gadamer neglects pre-reflexive modes of understanding – that would be absurd. The problem is rather that the concept of interpretation in its ordinary use generally refers to a reflective act, and that a hermeneutics that defined human beings as self-interpreting just in that sense would be open to phenomenological correction.

⁸ See, among other places, 'Overcoming Epistemology' and 'Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein', both in Taylor (1995).

⁹ See Merleau-Ponty, 1962 [1945]), and the commentary on this text by Taylor and Kullman (1958).

¹⁰ See Gadamer (1993 [1960]) and Taylor's discussion of Gadamer in 'Comparison, History, Truth' in Taylor (1995).

¹¹ See, for instance, Taylor (1980); (1990) and (2000). For further discussion of Taylor's hermeneutic realism see Smith (1997a) and Abbey (2000).

¹² See, for instance, Bohman (1991) and Martin (1994).

¹³ See for instance, Outhwaite (1987) and Habermas (1988).

¹⁴ See 'The Importance of Herder', in Taylor (1995), 83—87.

¹⁵ For Taylor's take on designative theories, see 'Language and Human Nature', 'Theories of Meaning' (both in Taylor, 1985a), and 'Heidegger, Language, Ecology' (in Taylor, 1995).

¹⁶ Ricoeur engages with Davidson's work in some detail (and in a qualifiedly sympathetic spirit) in Ricoeur (1992), and the relevance of Davidson's philosophy of language for hermeneutics is pressed by, amongst others, Andrew Bowie (1997).

¹⁷ See Taylor, 'Heidegger, Language, Ecology' in Taylor (1995), especially pp. 111-126.

¹⁸ I discuss this point further in Smith (1997b) and (2002a).

¹⁹ On the notion of authenticity see Heidegger (1962 [1927]), and for his cautious remarks about ethics see 'Letter on Humanism', in Heidegger (1993 [1947]), especially pp. 250-259.

²⁰ Sartre never managed to write the 'future work' on ethics alluded to in the final sentence of Being and Nothingness. See Sartre (1957 [1943]).

²¹ See, for instance, Levinas (1969 [1991]).

²² I do not have space to consider the details of the argument here. For further discussion see Smith (1997a) and (2002a).

²³ See for example Flanagan (1990) and Rorty and Wong (1990).

²⁴ See Heidegger (1962 [1927]).

²⁵ See Ricoeur 1992: 158—163.

²⁶ Again, let me refer the interested reader to further discussion of this point in Smith (2002a), pp. 100-102.

²⁷ This is by no means to say that Taylor has no use for the Aristotelian-humanist concept of judgement; the point is rather that Taylor does not thematise this concept like other hermeneutic thinkers do.

²⁸ See Taylor (1989a) and 'Explanation and Practical Reason', in Taylor (1995).

²⁹ See 'On the Pragmatic, the Ethical, and the Moral Employments of Practical Reason' in Habermas 1993.

³⁰ Whether this reflects Taylor's failure – allegedly typical of hermeneutics – to define morality in a precise manner, and so differentiate the rationality of moral argumentation from other kinds of practical discourse, is another matter. The thought that the hermeneutic-Aristotelian approach to practical reason is fatally compromised by its unwillingness or inability to circumscribe the moral is elaborated by Axel Honneth in his 'Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism: John McDowell and the Challenge of Moral Realism' (see Smith 2002b).

³¹ For such discussion, see Smith (1997a) and (2002a).