

A Comparison of the Views of Charles Taylor and Christian Smith on Human Nature

Dale DeWild, Central College

Abstract

Sociology has been crippled by a philosophy of social science that denies the relevance of important features of reality. Charles Taylor and Christian Smith have each articulated a searching evaluation of the current deficiencies of social science, and proposed a better philosophy. Their proposal adds legitimacy, breadth, and depth to an understanding of human nature. Taylor and Smith have each also created a vigorous and profound philosophy of human nature, and each of their views of human nature has incorporated a creative philosophy of morality. Along the way they have offered radically new conceptions of human agency, social causation, culture, selfhood, truth, and reality. Their philosophies of knowledge and their philosophies of human nature are largely in agreement, but their ideas about morality are incompatible. Sociologists typically avoid thinking about philosophical differences because past attempts to resolve them have only produced inconclusive debates. Perhaps Taylor and Smith offer a more secure foundation upon which a more solid sociology can be built. This paper is an invitation to explore these possibilities.

Key Words: critical realism, empiricism, human nature, knowledge, morality, reality

The emphasis on empirical verification in sociology discourages philosophical analysis. But sociologists are vexed by seemingly irresolvable differences, including the debate between empiricists and constructionists over whether sense perception is conceptually contaminated, the extent to which culture, including science, is socially constructed, and the role qualitative data should be permitted to play in causal analysis. These and other persistent issues are the consequence of unresolved conflicts about the best philosophy of social science. A philosophy of science is a body of presuppositions and assumptions about what counts as science. Positivists in the past argued that science depends exclusively on empirical evidence gathered via sound methodological protocol. Although positivism has been assailed for decades, little

consensus has been achieved about a potentially more adequate replacement.

Charles Taylor and Christian Smith offer a new way forward. In their separate but similar proposals, the importance of empirical evidence is retained, but empiricism as an ideology, the view that empirical knowledge is the only source of valid knowledge, is rejected. What is valuable in the postmodern critique of positivism is retained, but the view that social science is limited to describing the perspectives of people is also rejected. Taken together, Taylor and Smith propose a new understanding of social science.

Both Taylor and Smith are leading scholars in their respective academic disciplines. Taylor is a consummate philosopher who has contributed important insights to most branches of philosophy, as well as social history, social science, politics, linguistics, and art. Christian Smith is a consummate sociologist who has produced a respected body of empirical research and two potentially paradigm-changing books on the importance of understanding human nature in sociology. Both are also persons of Christian faith, which may have contributed to their intense interest in human nature.

Many social scientists dismiss any discussion of human nature because of their skepticism about philosophy. Therefore, it is necessary to describe briefly the theories of social science that Taylor and Smith articulate respectively, before describing their theories of human nature.

Taylor's Philosophy of Science

Early in his professional career, Taylor argued effectively against exclusive empiricism (1985). Data are not self-interpreting; we normally rely on culturally acquired concepts to interpret our perceptions. Disengaged description is possible, but only via rigorous, conscious effort to avoid imposing the mental categories absorbed from a particular culture. Furthermore, our perceptions are directed toward fulfilling our goals. We perceive the world through our activity, and some activities involve consciousness of the primary purpose of the activity. Without conscious intention, many activities (like writing this paper) would never happen (1985:24, 29).

In everyday life, an observer of social interaction brings meaning to her observations, though the meaning often remains unclear or incoherent. Therefore an interpretation is applied to bring into focus a meaning that would otherwise remain obscure. If the interpretation makes the observation clearer, it is accepted. In a similar fashion, the goal of social science is to make sense of social activity. Hard data can enhance the quality of interpretation, but so too can soft data. The validity of an interpretation or conclusion is not determined by the method used to reach it, but by whether a phenomenon has been gradually clarified in the process of interpretation.

Any concepts and explanations that make the best sense of a phenomenon are admissible in science. Any term that facilitates our best understanding of the real is not only admissible, but desirable. “What is real is what you have to deal with, what won’t go away just because it doesn’t fit your prejudices. By this token, what you can’t help having recourse to in real life is real” (1989:59).

Social norms, values, and moral assessments cannot be removed from how we live. We cannot cease judging others' actions and motivations and still continue to live our lives. If a concept is indispensable in making sense of a situation, it cannot be “declared irrelevant to the project . . . without an explanatory reduction” (1989:57). Therefore norms, values, and moral evaluation are real. Beliefs, feelings, goals, and intentions are also needed to offer the best account of reality. The goals of actors are not available to empirical observation, yet they must exist in reality, because sometimes we accomplish our goals, and this could not happen without initially deciding to pursue our goals (1989:57-59).

Educated guesses about the subjective meaning and intention of others are also a necessary ingredient in adequate social scientific explanations. Trust, for instance, is based on assessments about the reliability and responsibility of others, as well as awareness of our own thoughts and feelings—all of which are subjective. Trust undeniably influences our behavior. Yet the empirical standards of social science discourage considering factors such as trust that is not directly observable by others. Hence, a defective view of knowledge, a view that undervalues the role of subjective factors like trust in life, results in a flawed account of human nature, because it underestimates, and at times completely ignores, the importance of subjective meaning in social interaction (1985: 53-57).

Empiricism assumes that humans are disinterested, passive observers, when actually humans are active interpreters who rely on meaning to interpret their perceptions. Meaning is the product of subjective features of our minds, such as memory, emotions, language, and imagination. Empiricism is a theory of knowing that misrepresents the role our active mental life plays in knowing. A more accurate understanding of humans as they really are is prerequisite to understanding how humans know.

Smith’s Philosophy of Science

In *What is a Person?* (2010), Smith credits Taylor’s phenomenological method as one of the three primary sources of his own philosophy of social science. But in *To Flourish or Destruct* (2015), Smith moves beyond Taylor’s ideas, and credits critical realism for the continued development of his ideas. Like Taylor, Smith respects empirical knowledge and rejects empiricism. We need all the empirical evidence we can get, but the exclusive use of empirical methods to study people degrades them to a caricature of what they are in reality. What matters most in social situations are the social expectations embedded in them. The

assumption that people's beliefs do not help us understand human behavior is self-contradictory. And the belief that facts can be known through perception unaltered by prior knowledge, by concepts, and by motives and goals is indefensible (Smith 2015:82-88).

Critical realism is an emerging, sophisticated philosophy of science pioneered by Roy Bhaskar (1979) which now has advocates in most, if not all, academic disciplines (Gorski 2013), especially social science (Sayer 2000). While controversy remains among critical realists, there is a remarkable consensus about new norms for what constitutes scientific analysis, and Smith is one of the most respected spokespersons for critical realism in sociology.

Critical realism (CR) prioritizes the study of being or reality (ontology) over the study of how we know (epistemology). As such, it reverses the current prevailing research methodology, which places how we know prior to what we can describe as real. In contrast, CR assumes that we need to assess what exists before we can assess ways of knowing it. The real is whatever exists, whereas the empirical is only that which we can observe. CR maintains that ontological realism, epistemic perspectivalism, and judgmental rationality are required to keep social science on track. According to Taylor,

This means that much of reality exists and operates independently of our human awareness of it (ontological realism), that human knowledge about reality is always historically and culturally situated and conceptually mediated (epistemic perspectivalism), and that is nonetheless normally possible for humans over time to improve their knowledge about the real, to adjudicate rival accounts, and so to make justified truth claims about reality (judgmental rationality). (2015:13)

Unpacking CR requires diligent effort, and in endnote 28 Smith lists the books he considers to be most important (2010:283). Suffice it to say that understanding reality holds particular importance. Smith explains reality as follows:

Although all things with physical substance are real, not all real things have physical substance. Some immaterial things are real—including certain human mental objects (including reasons, intentions, and values), certain social facts (including a variety of cultural structures), and, I believe, certain normative facts (including the one upon which all of science is built, namely that it is better to know and believe what is true rather than what is false). I have also said that certain things that are real are not visible to direct human observation, that not everything real is empirical (observed) or even actual (what happens in the world when real capacities are activated, even if we do not observe them). Reality has a deep dimension often operating below the surface of empirical experience. (2010:13, 14)

Taylor's Philosophy of Human Nature

Taylor's masterworks are *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007). The bulk of both books is a history of changing conceptions of selfhood and changing conceptions of the sacred. The first of the seven sections in *Sources of the Self* includes among other things Taylor's thoughts on which aspects of humans are trans-cultural, trans-historical universals. That section is the primary source for understanding Taylor's ideas about human nature.

Taylor argues that humans have two distinguishable, but interwoven dimensions: an inherent, unchanging, ontological dimension, and a historically changing, culturally dependent dimension. Humans are alike in that they are morally aware, purposeful, self-interpreting, language-using, and dialogically emergent agents. But humans are also incredibly diverse in their culturally dependent understanding of morality, their goals, their conceptions of themselves, and their identities (Abbey 2000:56). According to Taylor, all humans everywhere have the following features.

Humans Are Agents

Higher animals are agents to the extent that they act on their environment in ways that seek to fulfill their desires. But humans can interpret, evaluate, and modify their desires to a greater extent than other animals can. When humans feel a desire, they search their surroundings for a way to satisfy that desire. They focus on the object of their desire, imagine alternative courses of action, and engage in a sequence of actions designed to consummate their desire.

Humans Use Language

Meanings are given to us as a cultural inheritance. The content of meaning varies by time and place, but the centrality of meaning and language in social affairs cannot be exaggerated. Meaning pervades social reality, and language is the medium that facilitates all the following attributes of human nature (Taylor.1985:74).

Humans Are Dialogical

We are shaped by our culture, and our identity emerges through dialog with others. Much like G. H. Mead (1934), Taylor thinks that our self-understanding begins with what our particular significant others think of us, and it expands as our range of social interaction enlarges. Later in the developmental process, we gradually individuate by establishing our own preferences, beliefs, and moral standards by which we seek to orient our actions (1989:35, 38).

Humans Are Self-aware

While animals are conscious beings with agency and purpose, recognizing themselves as

such is not part of their self-understanding. Only humans can articulate an awareness of self. Taylor uses shame as an example of a self-referring subjective interpretation, because shame is an emotion rooted in what we think about ourselves, and one which only makes sense if we are aware of our own expectations, evaluations and emotions (1985:54). For example, we can be ashamed of our last place finish because we did not get the respect we wanted. One's identity, in part, includes personality traits, interests, skills, self-concept, national origin, gender, and many other traits. Those who deny their own strong convictions face an integrity problem (1985:34, 35).

Humans Are Intentional Actors

Social forces, internal biological forces, and economic conditions explain much human activity, but these explanations often remain incomplete without also considering the purposes of the people who engaged in the activity. We cannot explain even our own actions without referring to our desires or intentions. We select a restaurant, drive to it, select an item on the menu, place an order, and so on. And when we observe the actions of others we incessantly infer the intention behind their action. If we accidentally bump someone and apologize, it will usually be passed over. But if the other person thinks we intended harm, it could spark retaliation. Intentions are crucial to understanding both ourselves and others (1985:120-2).

We are often do what we do for a cognitively informed subjective reason. Human action is the product of both external forces and internal intention. The reason for an action is not always obvious. We often have to "make sense" of our own and other's actions. Humans simply cannot be adequately understood without considering the meaning or reason for the act to the actor.

Humans Are Self-interpreting

The meaning we ascribe to ourselves is fundamental to who we are, therefore the person we understand ourselves to be is a key ingredient in our intentions, and thus our actions. In short, our desires and purposes reflect our self-understanding. For example, the clothes we wear depend on the task we anticipate undertaking during the day. According to Taylor, we can, in part, even choose the person we want to become and endeavor to become that person (1989:35). Some teenagers try out several self-interpretations and attempt to incorporate their current self-understanding into a consistent presentation of self. Once a particular persona is chosen, it may, over time, become a permanent feature of their self-concept.

Humans Are Innovative

Although beliefs, values, goals, and norms are internalized through socialization and then reinforced through social controls, people are not plastic. There are often many ways of

making sense of a given situation, and the human powers of reflexivity, thought, memory, emotionality, and reason give humans much control over their own thoughts (1985:63, 72). Because humans are capable of conceptual and interpretive innovation, human actions and reactions are often unpredictable and surprising.

Humans Are Moral Agents

Taylor distinguishes between two ways of reflecting on our desires. The first, which he calls “weak evaluation,” is to weigh which of our desires will actually provide the greatest satisfaction. Do I want pie or ice cream or both? In “strong evaluation,” the desires themselves are evaluated in terms of their worthiness. Some desires, such as greed and revenge, we attempt to restrain, while other desires we try to promote within ourselves, such as generosity and fairness. In weak evaluation, something we judge to be good is good simply because we desire it — choosing a restaurant for example. In strong evaluation, something is judged to be good because the desire itself is deemed to be good — being generous or honest, for example (1989:12-29).

However, people do not always act according to their strong evaluations, and are keenly aware that they are not acting as admirably as they could, according to their own standards. When they do enact their admirable desires, they are acting morally. Because normal adults can evaluate their own desires, they can be held responsible for their actions.

Human Identity is Defined by an Orientation to the Good

All of us are faced with questions about who we are, where we stand, and the worth of human life. We are faced with questions about the level of respect we should offer each other, what we should do and not do, and which particular way of life is most worth living. To answer these questions is to know who one is. We must know where we stand in order to know which course of action to take, and what meaning all sorts of things have for us (1985:34). Or as Taylor puts it, “My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, . . . or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (1989:27). Again, those who deny their own strong convictions face an integrity problem (1985:34, 35). Those who fail to commit to a moral orientation may struggle with a painful, frightening crisis of identity (1989:18).

Humans Interpret Their Lives as a Narrative

Each person has a sense of leading an unfolding yet coherent life that has a beginning, middle, and end. We have a continuous sense of self that connects our many diverse experiences into a thread that offers a sense of unity. To that end we each formulate a story that makes certain events more central than other events, and offers a key to thinking about the meaning of our lives as a whole, in the process granting a sense that our lives are significant

(1989:47).

Humans Are Spiritual Seekers

Humans want assurance that the way of life they have chosen is the most worthwhile. “[O]ne of the most basic aspirations of human beings [is] the need to be connected to or in contact with what we see as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental value” (1989:42). All humans want to live meaningful lives, and they find meaning by attaching themselves to a spiritual source from which they can fashion their identity and motivate their actions. This is a craving that is ineradicable from human life. People want to be in right relation to that which gives meaning to their lives (1989:44). Not to have a spiritual source is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless, and without a spiritual direction to our lives, nothing seems worth doing.

We crave a spiritual source that commands our awe, admiration, and love. It must therefore be independent of our desires, inclinations, and choices. Only then can it offer the standards by which our desires and choices can be judged. We do not feel comfortable when we choose our own standards, therefore following an external spiritual source gives us the sense that our life is fuller or deeper than our life would be without it (1989:17-20). Committing to a spiritual framework provides guidance for the whole of life, including what projects to pursue, what identity to establish, what goods to value, what moral framework to adopt, and what self to claim. And it motivates us from a sense of love rather than obligation (1989:43).

Taylor does not present his philosophical anthropology as a series of discrete points in the manner suggested above. Rather, it must be distilled from his discussion of a variety of issues on a variety of topics. Smith’s theory of human nature, on the other hand, is presented in precisely defined, discrete points.

Smith’s Personalism

Smith wrote *What is a Person?* to “construct a theoretical model of the ontology of the nature of human beings” (2010:10). The answer we give to the question What are humans? “is among one of the more important questions we face in our lives. The answer we give – whether reflectively or by default – helps to determine our view of our own selves, our lives, our very being and purpose, and of what makes a good society” (2010:7). He wrote *To Flourish or Destruct* in order to advance a “personalist account of human beings to help us better understand and explain human persons, motivations, interests, and the social life to which they give rise.... If I am right, much of social science is working with and propagating defective ideas about human beings in social life. . . We need to expand our range of vision and imagination to develop different ideas about what human beings are, in order to improve social science and the truthfulness of what social science teaches to others” (2015:1).

In *What is a Person?* Smith argues,

. . . that human beings as they exist in the world embody a particular constitution – they have a human nature rooted in nature more broadly. Human bodies interacting with their environments give rise through emergence to a constellation of powerful physical and mental capacities. Those capacities endow humans as real agents capable of intentionally affecting outcomes in the world. Those causal capacities interact in complex ways to give rise through emergence again to the “higher” level of reality of human personhood (2007:15, 16).

The concept of emergence features prominently in critical realism. Emergence is the opposite of reduction, and occurs when an entity at a higher level results from the interactive combination of entities that exist only at a lower level. The new emergent entity has qualities that were not present in the entities from which it is derived. Just as water has properties that hydrogen and oxygen do not have, personhood emerges from the interaction of multiple human capacities, and social institutions emerge from the interaction of multiple human persons (2015:36).

Higher level emergence is somewhat mysterious. In addition to being a collection of organs, a tiger has life and the ability to coordinate its organs in the service of that life—something no one can explain. Likewise, in the emergence of human personhood, Smith admits that “The complexity, subjectivity, multidimensionality, qualitative subtleties, and depths of personhood are too immense and mysterious for an investigative science to fully master, model, or explain” (2015:54).

Smith identifies thirty specific, innate, causal capacities that all humans possess. He defines causal capacities as powers that “endow humans with the ability to bring about changes in material or mental phenomena, to produce or influence objects and events in the material world” (2010:42). These capacities are functions of the human body, especially the brain, as it acts on its material and social environment. One capacity is consciousness, or subjective awareness of the world, which creates primary experience capacities. “(H)umans possess the natural capacity to *understand the real properties of quantity, quality, time and space*. . . . As conscious animals, humans are also capable of mental representation, of forming cognitive depictions of reality” (44). And humans are volitional: “Humans are able to will, desire, to aspire, to set something as a wanted goal or purpose” (45).

Secondary experience capacities include assigning causal attribution, interest formation, emotional experience, memory, and inter-subjective understanding. From these secondary experience capacities come twelve creating capacities: acting as the efficient cause of one's own actions and interactions, creativity, innovation and imagination, inventing technology, material cultivation and development, self-transcendence, the creation and communication of

meanings, symbolization, language use, the composition of narratives, valuation, anticipation of the future, and self-reflexivity. Finally, at the highest level of centrality and complexity, human capacities are capable of abstract reasoning, truth seeking, moral awareness and judgment, forming virtues, aesthetic enjoyment and judgment, and interpersonal communion and love (2010:54).

From the interaction of these capacities, the reality of personhood emerges.

What is a person? By 'person' I mean the particular kind of being that under proper conditions is capable of developing into (or has developed into) a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who—as the efficient cause of his or her responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world. (Smith 2015:35)

Although this definition repeats many of the capacities listed above, Smith adds two key phrases that were not included in the list of capacities: *center of* and *in order to*. By *in order to*, Smith refers to our causal powers. As *centers*, persons can “coordinate and integrate the immense number of sensory, cognitive, affective, volitional and other inputs, experiences, and outlooks into relatively unified, singular” projects (Smith 2015:42). Centers fuse all thirty human capacities together “into a single, coherent, existent life that is not simply a jumbling together of component parts but a distinct personal being” (Smith 2010:61).

Persons are conscious centers—conscious of the external environment, conscious of the internal realm of thoughts, feelings and intentions, and aware of their own awareness. Persons are reflexive beings, able to engage in evaluative conversations with themselves in an internal dialog. Persons are embodied souls and ensouled bodies. Persons are also self-transcending. They are capable moving beyond self-concern to concern for others (Smith 2010:62-65).

Furthermore, persons are centers of durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication. Subjective goals control and monitor most mental and physical activity. Persons see themselves as unique, and have an identity that remains continuous over time (Smith 2010:66). “Persons are self-governing centers of moral perception, evaluation, judgment, and commitment” (67). Persons are inescapably social, interactive, and communicative beings. To be a person is to communicate with others, to relate intersubjectively to arrive at mutual understandings. “Rich, interactive communication among persons is what gives rise to and sustains robust personhood” (68).

A further characteristic of personhood is that persons are developmentally, but not ontologically dependent on social interaction. Humans are born into a social order that shapes

who they become. By understanding that social support is necessary for survival and development, sociologists avoid the error of assuming humans are autonomous, self-defining individuals. And understanding that humans have innate natures and the power of agency helps sociologists avoid the error of holism or collectivism which assumes that humans are products of society (Smith 2015).

Notably, personhood is said to be an ontological reality that is present at conception. With adequate nurture a human develops into a self-governing center with agency and purpose. Personhood is not a possibility, but a fundamental, ineradicable reality for all human beings. “All humans are 100 percent persons in ontological being, even if not in the empirical realization” (Smith 2015:39).

Taylor’s theory of human nature is featured prominently in Smith’s theory. Smith has added many more ideas and in so doing has added both more specificity and more breadth. While Smith expressly agrees with Taylor, Taylor would likely agree with and appreciate Smith’s additions. But it is also likely that Taylor, who employs a more discursive approach that supports each point with a nuanced philosophic argument, would find Smith’s more declarative and definitive approach a little disconcerting because of Smith’s level of certainty. Given the long history of scholars and sages who have shared their best insights about human nature and their inability to approach a consensus on the topic, perhaps Taylor’s less certain approach is more appropriate.

Differences and Disagreements

Self-revelation

Both men are Catholic Christians who work within secular academic subcultures. Both are exceptionally open to learning from other disciplines and perspectives. Both are impeccably fair-minded and honest. Both want their writing to be read, considered, and debated by their academic peers, and they seek to meet their readers where they are by offering only arguments and evidence that any reasonable person could consider. Despite excluding explicit references to their religious beliefs, both have been subjected to criticism for allowing their Christian beliefs to influence their academic analysis.

Taylor is writing to philosophers, an audience that may be more open to new ideas and more tolerant of people with a religious viewpoint. Smith is writing to empirically minded sociologists, few of whom have any interest in philosophy and many of whom are skeptical, or closed-minded, about anyone who speaks from a religious perspective.

Smith removes his personal religious views entirely from the text of his writing. In his notes he occasionally acknowledges the compatibility of his ideas with a religious viewpoint. For example, in *To Flourish or Destruct* Smith never refers in the text to anything transcendent in his arguments for his view of human nature. However, in note 74 of Chapter 5, he writes:

“Certain kinds of theists can frame all of this within transcendent horizons by adding the need or good of particular kinds of relationships with divine beings, continued personal existence after death, and so on, without violating the essential outlook of the account presented here” (2015:324).

Smith states further that “My account would not unfairly be understood as a secular analogue to other natural law accounts that may be religiously oriented. Thus secular readers should be able to find my argument entirely convincing, even though it is also arguably compatible with certain theological outlooks” (2015:25). Similar statements appear in his *Moral, Believing Animals* (2003), and *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (2014).

Unlike Smith, Taylor reveals his faith at the very end of *Sources of the Self*. After asking if naturalism is able to “move us to extend help to the irremediably broken, such as the mentally handicapped, those dying without dignity, fetuses with genetic defects” he admits that “I am obviously not neutral in posing these questions. Even though I have refrained (partly out of delicacy, but largely out of a lack of arguments) from answering them, the reader suspects that my hunch. . .[is] that great as the power of naturalist sources might be, the potential of certain theistic perspectives is incomparably greater” (Taylor 1989:518).

Ruth Abbey, who knows Taylor personally, shares that, “As a Christian, Taylor believes that God is the source of goodness. He does not conceal his theism; rather he identifies it as one of the forces that drives him to question anthropocentrism” (Abbey 2000:31). Then she adds, “But he tries not to make his personal religious beliefs foundational to his moral theory, aiming instead to develop an explanation that is acceptable to people of different religious persuasions as well as those unpersuaded by religion” (31-2).

Life's Meaning

One of life's persistent questions is, what kind of life is worth living? According to Taylor, humans aspire “to be connected to, or in contact with, what they see as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental value” (Taylor 1989:42). This aspiration drives how we choose to live our lives. Some find their answer in fame, wealth, success, and popularity, while others find it in religion. Ironically, some even find the former through the latter.

Smith in turn argues that the purpose of human life is to flourish. “No larger or higher purpose beyond human flourishing exists in this world. Other goals and activities in life exist to serve the purpose of flourishing” (2015:204). Pleasure and contentment are short-lived. Flourishing is an entire life lived well, a life of virtue. Since one cannot thrive without truly seeking the thriving of others, personal flourishing means living in loving relationships; concern for others is one aspect of concern for self. And Smith adds: “This approach does not mean the movement toward one's personal good is essentially selfish, since people must define their genuine good as also necessarily entailing and serving the well-being of others” (2015:2).

Taylor, on the other hand, distinguishes between two conceptions of flourishing. Some

people find hope for a fulfilling life within their lifetime, others do not. Religious believers set other goals, such as when Christian devotion to God and doing His will actually involves self-denial. Even though God desires flourishing, obeying his will requires sacrifice. Buddhism also asks for self-renunciation. In both religions, flourishing in this life is not the final goal (2007:17). This distinction between the two types of flourishing is a recurring theme throughout *A Secular Age* (2007), where Taylor repeatedly emphasizes the following:

Now the point of bringing out this distinction between human flourishing and goals which go beyond it is this. I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond flourishing. Of no previous society was this true. (18)

Taylor attributes the view that human flourishing is life's ultimate goal to what he terms exclusive humanism. Such humanism, however, has left many feeling restless, unable to give meaning to life, suffering, and death. For many modern seekers, nothing proves worth doing, and they are left with a sense of meaninglessness, emptiness, and a kind of vertigo (18). Clearly, for Taylor, flourishing is best realized when both the source and the goal is transcendent.

Smith's Philosophy of Morality

According to Smith, humans are *natural-goods-seeking persons*, meaning they are born with the need and desire to flourish. To flourish is to realize in actual lived experience the satisfaction of six basic goods, two of which are moral affirmation, and social belonging and love. These basic goods and interests motivate moral action. Thus, humans are by nature motivated to do good and be good and to love and be loved. "One cannot thrive without truly and genuinely seeking the thriving of other persons," Smith writes. "As long as people understand their true good to necessarily entail seeking the well-being of others, that self-seeking cultivates love and is morally legitimate (2015:205).

But doing good does not occur automatically; it is actually rather complicated. Life presents lots of challenges and barriers to flourishing, mostly from three sources: culture, social structure, and personality. Culture channels human motivations by means of its "particular meanings, categories, schemas, concepts, trends, norms, expectations, currents, concerns, problems, moralities and other aspects" Similarly, "human action is also powerfully organized, constrained and directed by the causal capacities of *social institutions and structures*. . . Finally, human motivations are also always through specific structures of personal beliefs, desires, and emotions" (2015:188 italics in original).

People whose pursuit of flourishing has been obstructed act immorally. Some are victims of unjust forces or circumstances, others are merely deprived of the chance to flourish (2015:224-5). Overcoming these challenges requires great effort, good judgment, and prudent choices (Smith 2010:401). People who do evil have made bad choices. Some have given up on flourishing; some resist the challenges of growth; some avoid the struggle to do good by imposing pain on others, and that is just the beginning. Some deliberately choose evil, which exists when flourishing is actively subverted (2015:227), and Smith develops an elaborate theory of evil in chapter seven of *To Flourish or Destruct*.

Flourishing requires that people learn the “qualities, habits, orientations, disciplines and characteristics over the course of their life that tend to promote flourishing” (Smith 2010:402). Everyone needs to learn virtues such as temperance, prudence, courage, justice, humility, mercy, dignity, tenacity, and concord, because learning and practicing these dispositions leads to flourishing. But making these dispositions a fundamental part of our daily activity requires a lifetime of self-correction, reflection, self-direction, and choosing (2015:205-209).

Taylor’s Moral Philosophy

Taylor begins by describing two facets of our normal response to an offensive act. The first facet is visceral intuition, which is similar to our love of sweets, or our feeling nauseous from certain smells or fear of falling. The second facet is cultural learning that shapes and channels our intuitions. The universal, normal tendency to respect the life and well-being of others is a moral intuition. However, our learned response tells us which groups of people to respect and why. According to Taylor, “The whole way in which we think, reason, argue and question ourselves about morality supposes that our moral reactions have these two sides: that they are not only “gut” feelings but also implicit acknowledgments of the claims concerning their objects” (Taylor 1989:5-7).

Clarity about our moral intuitions gradually requires us to identify and articulate a moral framework, a set of beliefs that provide coherence and purpose to a person's moral values and perspective. As we clarify our moral framework, we transform the dark ambiguity of intuition into the daylight of public expression. Religions serve in this regard by providing moral frameworks which are ways of organizing and articulating our moral values. Secular “isms” like Marxism and liberalism also provide moral frameworks for their followers. Everyone has a moral framework (Abbey 2000:34), and trying to live without a framework is impossible (Taylor 1989:27).

At bottom, moral frameworks include some idea of the supreme good, which is foundational to how a person assesses the direction of her life. But some moral frameworks are clearer than others about what the supreme good is supposed to be. As a consequence, there are individuals who lack a strong sense of what for them is ultimately good (Abbey 2000:36-7). Moral frameworks also include a moral source, or ideas about where that framework came

from. In pre-modernity, notions of God were the source of a shared moral framework, and Christianity modelled an objective, transcendent moral source that existed independent of the human mind. In modernity, the Enlightenment discarded transcendent, divine sources of morality and demanded immanent human sources instead.

Contrasting Moral Sources

According to Taylor, once old religious beliefs had been discarded, a way had to be found to locate moral sources in human nature. Modern moral philosophers constructed several moral philosophies to explain why people should act morally without referring to God or anything outside the naturalistic worldview (2007:245). This move, writes Taylor, “not only shuts God out, it attributes this great power of benevolence or altruism to humans” (247).

One way of grounding morality in immanent sources was through disengaged, instrumental reason. Expanding the circle of people who we see as like ourselves overtakes our self-centered point-of-view and allows us to identify with others. In the logic of utilitarianism, our aim should be general happiness (250-1, 694). Another proposed moral source was universal will. According to Kant, humans have the awesome capacity to act on universal principles. To answer the question, what should I do? “Work out what would produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Or work out what I could choose when I have treated other people’s prescriptions as if they were my own,” Taylor explains.

These moral philosophies began with human traits such as the desire for happiness or the notion of human dignity. But another trait was needed: sympathy. Hence it was also postulated that to suffer when others suffer is part of our emotional nature. And it Moreover, sympathy had to be extended to everyone, thereby making universal solidarity a basic human trait. Everyone needs to be motivated to treat everyone else with benevolence *and* justice. So the assumption was made that people are naturally sympathetic (251).

Given the appalling destruction of humans by humans during the twentieth century, the strength of these human moral sources are questionable, especially the assumption of universal sympathy. The modern era has no lack of moral ideals—benevolence, courage, kindness, and honesty are widely valued. But Taylor doubts that moral sources based on human nature can inspire the level of sustained dedication required to meet these high standards.

Pre-modern morals were concerned with *who* we ought to *be*. In a profound cultural transformation, modern morals are concerned only with *what* we ought to *do*. “This excludes both what we *ought to do* even though we aren’t obliged . . . , and also what it may be good to *love*” (1989:79). But Taylor believes that without the experience of being moved by something larger than ourselves, modern morals offer less motivation to their adherents (74).

In summary comparison, Smith’s moral philosophy is based on the human desire to flourish, whereas Taylor thinks that all modern moral philosophies, including Smith’s, do not inspire the awe, love, and dedication that a transcendent moral source can arouse. “Because no

non-anthropocentric good, indeed nothing outside subjective goods, can be allowed to trump self-realization, the very language of morals and politics tends to sink to the relatively colourless subjective talk of ‘values’,” writes Taylor (1989:507). He concludes *Sources of the Self* by stating that “as great as the power of naturalistic sources might be, the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater” (518). A transcendent moral source offers more clarity, better guidance, higher aspirations, more motivation, and more satisfaction when implemented than non-religious moral sources offer (1989:517).

Nevertheless, Taylor would probably find some value in Smith’s ideas. Taylor is unflagging in his generosity, and characteristically responds to attacks from his critics by thanking them for what he learned from them. So it is not surprising that he speculates that even immanent views of morality have transcendent overtones:

In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanism, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it. (2007:768)

Taylor knows as well as anyone how immune most modern thinkers are to any talk of transcendence. So he may agree that, given that Smith’s purpose is to bring morality into sociological discourse, there may be no initial alternative to an immanent philosophy of morality.

Taylor and Smith have each presented sociologists with a way out of several current controversies that vex the discipline. Critical realism offers a philosophy of science within which better theory and more realistic methods can be developed and evaluated. Together, Taylor and Smith offer us new ways of looking at culture and social structure based on a better understanding of reality. They offer hope for a sociology that recognizes in persons a level of subtlety and complexity that comprehends human nature more fully. Perhaps the trend that Taylor and Smith are leading is becoming a full-blown scientific shift or movement, not just another intellectual fad. Occasionally, a scientific impasse triggers a Kuhnian paradigm shift in understanding (Kuhn 1962). Could we be in one of those times?

However, in the arena of morality, their disagreement appears to be beyond a resolution, but hopefully, the tension between their positions will encourage more reflection. For now, Christians and other religionists need to code-switch, that is, converse in the moral philosophy of their particular audience. Meanwhile, secular thinkers need to face Taylor and Smith’s challenges to their current assumptions.

Overall, the disagreements between Taylor and Smith are few and relatively insignificant; their agreements are more numerous and important. Given the range of views

about social science and human nature that are in circulation today, their agreements are worth celebrating.

References

- Abbey, Ruth. 2000. *Charles Taylor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bhaskar, Roy. 1979. *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Science*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Gorski, Philip S. 2013. "What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?" *Contemporary Sociology*, 42(5):658-670.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Porpora, Douglas. 2015. *Reconstructing Sociology: A Critical Realist Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sayer, Andrew. 2000. *Realism and Social Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Smith, Christian. 2003. *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Christian. 2010. *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Christian. 2014. *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Christian. 2015. *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Direct correspondence to Dr. Dale DeWild at dewildd@central.edu