Ethics and Ontology

The Moral Phenomenology of Charles Taylor

University of Antwerp, 10-11 June 2016
City Campus – Room B003 – Ground Floor

Universiteit
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Conference theme

This conference centers on Charles Taylor's paper "Ethics and Ontology" (2003) and its central theme of the relationship between ethical beliefs and ontological views. Taylor raises the issue of scientific naturalism by arguing that it sets us the following challenge: either we correct our (implicit) naturalist ontology or we must revise the most salient features of our moral experience. Taylor's moral phenomenology defends our commonsense moral reactions against reductionist views that attempt to dismiss these reactions altogether as mere projection on a neutral physical world. His criticism is that this naturalist ontology annihilates our very sense of morality, that is, the sense that moral values are in some way different from, higher than, or incommensurable with natural desires.

Against this background, the central question of the conference is: what do our ethical views commit us to ontologically? Exploring this question, both Taylor's article "Ethics and Ontology" and related topics of his moral phenomenology will be discussed, such as: the tensions between phenomenology, ethics, and ontology in Taylor's writings, his critique of reductionist naturalism and its relevance for exposing the underlying anthropological and ethical commitments within contemporary philosophy of mind, his conceptions of strong evaluation, narrative ethics, Best Account, subtle language, ordinary life, secularity, and the importance of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, William James, and Max Scheler for understanding Taylor's thought. In this way, this conference aims to discuss Taylor's moral phenomenology in order to open up the question of the implicit ontological commitments behind our ethical beliefs.

Keynote speakers

Ruth Abbey (University of Notre Dame) is a political theorist with research and teaching interests in the areas of Charles Taylor, Friedrich Nietzsche, feminist political thought, liberal political thought, and animal ethics. She is the author of *Philosophy Now: Charles Taylor* (Acumen Publishing and Princeton University Press), *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (Oxford University Press), and *The Return of Feminist Liberalism* (Acumen Publishing and McGill Queens University Press). She is the editor of *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Charles Taylor* (Cambridge University Press) and *Feminist Interpretations of Rawls* (Penn State University Press).

Nicholas Smith's (Macquarie University) research interests lie in modern European philosophy, social and political philosophy, theories of subjectivity, and religion and modernity. He is the author of *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Polity Press), *Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity*, (Routledge), and the editor of *Recognition Theory as Social Research: Investigating the Dynamics of Social Conflict*, (co-edited with Shane O'Neill, Palgrave Macmillan), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Charles Taylor* (co-edited with Arto Laitinen) and *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World* (Routledge).

Arto Laitinen (University of Tampere) specializes in social philosophy, ethics, philosophical anthropology, social ontology, theories of practical reason, value, and normativity, theories of mutual recognition, and solidarity. His publications include *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources. On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics* (De Gruyter) and he is the editor of *Recognition and Social Ontology* (co-edited with Heikki Ikäheimo, Brill), *Hegel on Action* (co-edited with Constantine Sandis, Palgrave Macmillan) and *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Charles Taylor* (co-edited with Nicholas Smith).

Programme

Friday 10th June 2016

09:30 – 10:00	Registration
10:00 – 10:05	Opening
10:05 – 10:50	*Michiel Meijer:* Ontological gaps. The predicament of Charles Taylor
10:50 – 11:05	Coffee break (Agora Café)
11:05 – 11:50	**Ruth Abbey:** Ontology, ethics, and *A Secular Age*
11:50 – 13:30	Lunch break (Agora Café, lunch included for speakers)
13:30 – 14:00	*Angela Roothaan:* William James and Max Scheler: Taylor's predecessors in moral phenomenology
14:00 – 14:30	*Allessandra Gerolin:* Taylor's critique of reductionist naturalism: a dialogue with Bernard Williams
14:30 – 15:00	*Silvia Pierosara:* Which ontology behind narrative ethics?
15:00 – 15:15	Coffee break (Agora Café)
15:15 – 16:00	**Arto Laitinen:** What if the Best Account is too good to be true?
18:00	Conference Dinner (University Club, for speakers)

Saturday 11th June 2016

10:00 – 10:05	Opening
10:05 – 10:50	*Guy Vanheeswijck:* Taylor's Hegel: an ambiguous legacy
10:50 – 11:05	Coffee break (Agora Café)
11:05 – 11:35	*Simon Lee:* Taylor's Hegelian critique of McDowell
11:35 – 12:05	*Martha Claeys:* Subtle language: how Taylor's notion of modern literature and poetry can help define the language of the engaged perspective
12:05 – 13:30	Lunch break (Agora Café, lunch included for speakers)
13:30 – 14:00	*Farid Zahnoun:* A moral outlook on human cognition
14:00 – 14:30	*Dave Ward:* Ethics, ontology, and embodied expression: Taylor and Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology and naturalism
14:30 – 15:00	Coffee break (Agora Café)
15:00 – 15:45	**Nicholas Smith:** Ordinary life between ethics and ontology

Abstracts

Michiel Meijer (University of Antwerp)

Ontological Gaps. The Predicament of Charles Taylor

What do our ethical views commit us to ontologically? Charles Taylor's answer in "Ethics and Ontology" (2003) is that we have to respond at least to the following challenge: either we correct our (implicit) naturalist ontology or we must revise the most salient features of our moral experience. Taylor claims that a naturalist perspective is commonplace in Western culture – that there is no difference in principle between human agents and any other living organisms in nature, and that, therefore, morality is best explained in physical terms. His criticism is that this naturalist ontology annihilates our sense of morality in its very meaning, that is, the sense that moral values are in some way different, higher, or incommensurable with natural desires.

In response, Taylor proposes a phenomenology of moral experience that centers on his concept of "strong evaluation". Taylor employs this notion not only to refute naturalism, but also to explain his philosophical-anthropological theory of the self and his phenomenological account of morality. Moreover, Taylor's concept of strong evaluation further raises questions of ontology that cannot be explained solely in terms of human subjectivity.

I argue that his position is best understood as a phenomenology with ethical and ontological implications. That is, he evokes basic moral experiences to argue that we cannot make sense of morality without recognizing certain ontological commitments at the same time. This causes a central tension: How to align Taylor's initial phenomenological starting point, which departs from *introspection*, with his claims about the ontology *outside* our moral experience? And what, if anything, are we committed to ontologically by Taylor's moral phenomenology?

My analysis suggests that Taylor's arguments against naturalism, while revealing, are only partly successful. His strategy not only conceals fundamental tensions, but also hides from view the reality that Taylor lacks an adequate ontological framework to sustain his central doctrine of strong evaluation. The result is a set of "ontological gaps", that is, a set of explanatory and argumentative flaws in Taylor's ontology.

The contribution of this paper is, first, to explore the potential of Taylor's phenomenological approach to ethics. Second, it makes the case for a tension between moral-phenomenological and ontological claims within Taylor's writings. Third, this way of conceptually carving up Taylor's rich philosophical thought not only enables us to comprehend its different dimensions; it also raises the question of their relationship and the metaphysical status of Taylor's ontological view.

Ruth Abbey (University of Notre Dame)

Ethics, Ontology, and A Secular Age

This paper looks at Taylor's concept of strong evaluation and the way it leans out to a reality beyond the human, all too human. Observing that Taylor harbors a non-anthropocentric ontology throughout the course of his career, it asks whether and how these connections might have changed with the advent of *A Secular Age*. It concludes with some questions about the right terminology for describing these important features of his thought.

Angela Roothaan (VU University Amsterdam)

William James and Max Scheler: Charles Taylor's Predecessors in Moral Phenomenology

When, in 1989, Charles Taylor published his *Sources of the Self*, he aimed to transform the philosophical discourse on morality. He criticized Anglophone ethics for its naturalism and (in a certain sense) anti-ontological stance, a position he later elaborated on in his paper "Ethics and Ontology" (2003). To his view the empiricist and rationalist accounts of morality which represent this naturalism have lain under a "great epistemological cloud". Taylor proposed to work towards richer descriptions of morality, which would include reflections on anthropology and ontology, in short – a moral phenomenology. Strangely enough, in so doing he never referred to Max Scheler, whose *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (1913-1916) can be seen as the classic work on phenomenological ethics. This work had been translated into English in 1973, which would have made it available to Taylor.

Core concepts of Taylor, like "hypervalues" and "moral sources", describe moral reality in ways that echo Scheler's phenomenology of values. Also, Taylor's debate with contemporary naturalist ethics, remind one of Scheler's arguments against the empiricist view of human nature on which Kant built his ethics. Taylor's idea of a moral ontology echoes another older thinker close to phenomenology whom he didn't mention in *Sources of the Self* – William James. Values are real, according to Taylor, insofar as they inspire/cause actual moral behavior – which is a pragmatic criterion of reality. James, like Scheler, was critically discussing Kantian anthropology and ontology (among other positions). Although we nowadays tend to see pragmatism and phenomenology as distinct, American versus continental European currents, in their days there were many connections between the two worlds of thought.

Another point James and Scheler share with Taylor, is the connection they see between morality and spirituality. Taylor explains his introduction of the "vague term" "spirituality" by pointing at the need to provide a richer articulation and description of morality than just in terms of "[…] such issues as justice and the respect of other people's life […] I want also to look at our sense of what underlies our own dignity, […] what

makes our lives meaningful and fulfilling." (Taylor, SoS, 4) Similarly, Scheler and James were not just interested in religion as a social or cultural phenomenon, but rather in how, through religious value experience, our lives get meaning and orientation. Their approach to moral ontology radically takes the road of unfiltered experience instead of that of reductionist reasoning, which only recognizes experience insofar as it is validated through scientific research. For James it is experience of the religious, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and for Scheler experience of values in his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (1913-1916), providing the material for their moral phenomenology. In my paper I will return to these works and investigate what the reflections on moral orientation and ontology they hold can add to Taylor's project of finding a non-naturalist ethics.

Allessandra Gerolin (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart Milan)

Charles Taylor's Critique of Reductionist Naturalism: a Dialogue with Bernard Williams

Starting from Charles Taylor's article "Ethics and Ontology" (2003) the aim of this paper consists in analyzing the relationship between ethical beliefs and ontological views in Taylor's philosophy and, in particular, the relevance of the "dialogue" he engaged with Bernard Williams on this topic. As Taylor argues in this paper, Williams has helped lay to rest the early unsophisticated forms of fact/value dichotomy: in particular, in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), Williams develops a critique of R. M. Hare's prescriptivism arguing that, even if at the level of rational reflection human beings can take distance from their desires, in the real life they cannot avoid to be animated by them and, while taking decisions, they are always influenced by what they consider important in their life. The notion of importance (that Taylor values but that – according to him – has to be rooted within strong evaluations in order to avoid the limits of Williams' "sophisticated naturalism") is relevant in order to overcome the mistakes of "moral objectivism": according to Taylor (as he argues in *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, 1989) Williams has been able to show the impossibility to find descriptive equivalents for a whole host of key value terms we use in our daily life: we cannot grasp what would hold together the instances of terms like "courage", "brutality" or "gratitude" as a class if we prescind from their evaluative point. This means that their "descriptive" meaning cannot be separated from the "evaluative". However, as Taylor argues in "Ethics and Ontology", we live in a post-Galilean world where we face a tension between phenomenology (the fact that higher values are ineradicable from our deliberations) and ontology, as the latter is defined naturalistically. The point, then, is to challenge the naturalistic ontology as such: the human world of thick and strong evaluations needs to be understood on its own terms rather than being sliced a priori to fit the post-Galilean model. Elsewhere Taylor ("The Validity of Transcendental Arguments" and *Sources of the Self*) – developing his phenomenology into a proper hermeneutics – presents an argument based on the transcendental conditions of the moral

experience as such (overcoming the limits of Williams' sophisticated naturalism) that is an exploration of the limits of the conceivable in human life drawn from our knowledge of what we actually do when we do so. The challenge, then, is to show that not any ontology might be the adequate basis for our moral responses as the ultimate basis for accepting any explanation is that it makes better sense of us than do their rivals.

Silvia Pierosara (University of Macerata)

Which Ontology behind Narrative Ethics?

Starting from suggestions made by Charles Taylor in his essay "Ethics and Ontology", my contribution intends to problematize the relationship between ontology and ethics from the standpoint of narrative ethics, as addressed by Taylor himself, amongst others.

The present contribution is divided into three parts. In the first I aim to go beyond the "binary" dichotomy in the relationship between ethics and ontology as presented in Taylor's essay. In other words, my hypothesis is that ethics requires an ontology that distances itself just as much from reductionist naturalism – which Taylor does not hesitate to criticize with solid argument – as it does from ancient and medieval ontological models; to a certain extent, both viewpoints redefine the space of uncertainty and diminish the importance of choice, ascribing its responsibility to nature or to our ontological and anthropological structure or make-up, as metaphysically certified and accepted. Equally, and conversely, both models diminish the optional nature of ethical choices, the former by invalidating them, the latter by suggesting man's exceptional nature to be "genetic", codified as a need to search for and construct meaning.

In the second part I will seek to position the move towards narrative ethics in relation to an implicit ontology. Taylor, in "Ethics and Ontology", recognizes that man's own way of life "consists of ways of sense making": this human trait is thus an ontological presupposition, or precomprehension, in which its objective correlate, i.e. the narration of each individual life experience, inevitably cannot be expressed except as a product automatically endowed with meaning. The deep-seated reason for such an expression can be found by extending our outlook towards the various proposals offered by narrative ethics. Indeed, it can be noted that the implicit ontological presupposition that defines man as a meaning-making being runs the risk of being accepted unquestioningly as an automatism traceable to the so-called "pre-narrative quality of human experience". Here I would like to put forward the hypothesis that this pre-narrative quality is an ex ante projection of the work of meaning-making that generally comes about ex post and, above all, is not within everybody's grasp. This would be an unwarranted ontologization of features of human moral experience (goal-seeking; the structural opening known as intentionality; the aspiration towards a goal that gives a life a sense of accomplishment).

Finally, in the third part I will attempt to clarify that the organization of the relationship between ontology and ethics within the perspective of narrative ethics does not mean doing away with the ontological dimension. On the contrary, it must

presuppose an ontological background which, however, cannot be identified only in the search for and making of meaning and sense, since this characteristic cannot be said to be universal: it is instead an ability that must be acquired, not one to be taken for granted. Indeed, the ontological background of narrative ethics may be traced from a phenomenology of fragility, exposure, and interdependence. These three explanations demonstrate that an ethics that finds its application in narrative can do so only inasmuch as 1) the discovery of fragility implies a narrative thematization; 2) exposure evokes unconditional listening; 3) interdependence implies the common construction of sense and meaning. The emancipatory reach of narrative has to accommodate the possibility of failure of meaning, so that man as a "self-interpreting animal" can become an anthropological objective to aspire to, not an ontologically and immediately acquired given. The definition of man as a self-interpreting animal should therefore be delineated in the sense of an endeavour, so that each individual can build up his own mediated relation with meaning, rendering self-narrative a practice available to all.

Arto Laitinen (University of Tampere)

What if the Best Account is too good to be true?

This paper will discuss some arguments against too quick moves from ethical views to ontological commitments. There may be several ontologies that would make sense of the same ethical views. This is what Taylor argues in his "Cross-Purposes": normative individualism does not entail ontological individualism, while being compatible with it. This seems also true of normative ethics and meta-ethical views about moral properties: expressivists, subjectivists and (naturalist and non-naturalist) Robust Realists can agree, say, that it is wrong to kill people.

In *Sources of The Self*, Taylor suggests a Best Account-principle: a theoretical view which makes best sense of our experience should be adopted. (A related view is defended by David Enoch about "deliberative indispensability".) But of course, making best sense of our experience is not the only desideratum. What if the Best Account is too good to be true? Or not good enough? Or not better than an alternative? Say, perhaps various supernatural hypotheses would make best sense of an agent's moral experiences, but nonetheless strike the agent as unbelievable – in this case it seems that an ontological commitment on part of the agent does not follow. Perhaps the agent's ontological commitments are compatible with the moral experiences while not illuminating them in any particular way. In cases where one's ontological commitments conflict with one's moral experiences, one should perhaps either revise one's ontology or one's moral views. But even there, in different cases the right direction might be different. (The puzzle cases of moral status of persons may illuminate that)

Further, if we distinguish between descriptive claims (say, feeding this stuff to the horse will kill it) and ontological claims (say, the living horse is numerically different from its dead remains), evaluative claims sometimes have direct relationship with descriptive claims while being compatible with either of two ontological views. I will end

by discussing the difference between "constitutive goods" and other roles that ontological background pictures play in Taylor's theory.

Guy Vanheeswijck (University of Antwerp)

Taylor's Hegel: An Ambiguous Legacy

Anyone who is somehow familiar with Taylor's work, notices the striking contrast between the renowned Hegel-scholar Taylor on the one hand and the original philosopher Taylor on the other: there are only scarce references to Hegel's name in Taylor's major writings. The reason for this contrast is obvious: even if Taylor remains convinced that Hegel's central question – how to reconcile embodied subjectivity with the objectivity of nature and history? – is still a challenging question in contemporary western society, he deems Hegel's answer to that question unsatisfactory because of ontological and linguistic reasons alike.

Due to his dissatisfaction with Hegel's ontology and philosophy of language, Taylor felt obliged after his period of Hegel-scholarship to return to these two issues of ontology and philosophy of language so as to find a more appropriate answer to the question how to situate embodied subjectivity ontologically. In "Ethics and Ontology" (2003), however, Taylor concludes that the hoped-for reconciliation between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology is still premature.

Therefore, in his two latest books, *Retrieving Realism* (2015) and *The Language Animal* (2016), he elaborates a moral ontology ("pluralist robust realism") and a philosophy of language ("subtler languages") in order to remove the tension between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology. But do these two books provide the hoped-for reconciliation that was still lacking in "Ethics and Ontology"?

Simon Lee (University College London)

Taylor's Hegelian Critique of McDowell

"Ethics and Ontology" inaugurates Taylor's long-running engagement with McDowell. Indeed, a year after he delivered this paper, he reproduced most of it—almost word for word—as a review of McDowell's *Mind, Value, and Reality* and *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Arguably, then, it's a paper about him. In it, Taylor offers a critique of McDowell's claim to have reconciled moral phenomenology with naturalist ontology. Simply put, Taylor thinks that this claim is premature. And ironically so, since it sounds as premature as the scientific naturalist's claim to have explained our moral phenomenology in exclusively scientific terms. For, while McDowell may have laid to rest one source of the tension between ethics and ontology—namely, the idea that if something's subjective, it's not properly real—he has left other sources unscathed and untouched. Taylor mentions the ethics of human rights as an example, whose proponents believe that their values possess a reality beyond the bounds of any naturalist ontology.

Such incommensurably higher values, therefore, defy the very idea of reconciliation that McDowell has claimed for them, because they're felt to be real in a non-subjective way.

Now, what I'd like to do with my contribution is to point out the Hegelian undertones that I've detected in this critique and, in doing so, relate it back to Taylor's earlier work on Hegel. Specifically, I have in mind his discussion of Hegel's polemic against Kant in the *Logic* and the closely-related polemic against what's called the 'natural consciousness' in the *Phenomenology*. Both polemics take issue with the idea that contradictions could be resolved by tracing them back to some fault in our ordinary thinking, that is, some fault in the subject. McDowell seems to make such a move, since he treats the tension between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology as if it were a Kantian antinomy—there's a tension only because we're confused, having made the fault of thinking that if something's subjective, it's not properly real. The hope is that, once we spot this faulty train of thought, we should no longer feel the tension to be a philosophically problematic one. Hegel, however, thinks that contradictions can't simply be contained by the subject.

I believe that looking at the paper in the light of these things would be helpful, not least because it would help us understand why Taylor's more recent critiques of McDowell in 'Foundationalism and the Inner-Outer Distinction' and 'Retrieving Realism' have shifted the emphasis away from the tension between ethics and ontology—instead, these critiques emphasise the tension between engaged and disengaged agency. After all, the nature of subjectivity has always been what's at stake in the debate between Taylor and McDowell. In addition, I'd like to suggest that Taylor could've taken his critique further by exploiting Hegel's idea that the natural consciousness is unhappy. This would've allowed him to argue that McDowell doesn't simply lay to rest one source to the neglect of others, but introduces another source of tension which, though perhaps not felt as philosophically problematic, is certainly felt as unhappiness.

Martha Claeys (University of Antwerp)

Subtle Language. How Charles Taylor's notion of modern literature and poetry can help define the language of the engaged perspective

Pain, love, friendship, freedom, responsibility, sense of purpose, justice, pleasure. The meaning of all these concepts is closely interwoven with the human experience of them. Indeed, human involvement can be called constitutive for the meaning of each of those notions. Friendship, for example, loses all its meaning when we ignore the human experiential involvement. It is impossible to discard the engaged human perspective without touching the realm of meanings and connotations that surrounds these subjects. The biological definition of pain for example, a chemical reaction between neurotransmitters, does not nearly have the same moral persuasive power that pain undoubtedly has when it is understood from an engaged perspective as an intense and heartfelt experience.

The personal component is large for notions of love, pain, friendship, and so on. Yet philosophers attempt to articulate general theories about exactly those personal themes – what are good reasons for love? Is it legitimate for friendship to impose moral claims? And what constitutes freedom? The discipline of ethics, for instance, is an attempt to formulate general principles and rules that can give guidance in making a just and fair decision. Sometimes we even feel that it is just to impose those rules upon others. Human rights, for example, are often considered to be universally valid and we feel that whoever doesn't respect them is *wrong*. However, there is no measurable "proof" of the validity of these principles, except for an argument based on moral experience and concepts of dignity, the value of human life, the good, and so on. It seems that there are valuable things to be said about personal experiences that transcend the strictly personal.

In *The Language Animal* (2016), Charles Taylor explains how language can generate meaning and determine our conception of the world. This constitutive-expressive theory is opposed to a designative-instrumental theory, which holds that language is merely a means to express things that exist independently of language. Following Taylor's constitutive-expressive view of language, I will claim that it is the language that we use that determines the perspective we take – engaged or detached. If language indeed has meaning-generating power, it can explain how different meanings and arguments are generated for both of those perspectives through the language game we use in each perspective.

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor develops the notion of "subtle language". He describes how modern authors and poets recuperated the lived human experience, which was referred to the sideline in science and philosophy due to an increasingly mechanic and scientific worldview. Taylor refers to the language that these poets and authors used to express the lived experience as "subtle language". I argue that to speak or write from an engaged perspective is to use a language that is very similar to Taylor's concept of subtle language. From his description, I distill several characteristics to define the language that we use to speak in an engaged way about pain, love, friendship, freedom, responsibility, sense of purpose, justice, pleasure, and so on.

Farid Zahnoun (University of Antwerp)

A Moral Outlook on Human Cognition

It has now been almost half a century since Charles Taylor published his paper "Mind-Body Identity; A Side Issue?", which appeared in *Philosophical Review* , April 1967, and which marked the beginning of a lifelong critical engagement with philosophy of mind and epistemology. For although Taylor's philosophical corpus is characterized by a remarkable versatility, some themes tend to recur. As Taylor himself put it in the preface to his 1995 *Philosophical Arguments*: "These themes have been bothering me for decades…" And the epistemological theme would go on to bother him for at least another twenty years, as can be judged by the fact that only last year we saw the publication of *Retrieving*

Realism (2015), a book in which he, together with Dreyfus, once again takes up some of the epistemological issues that have been "bothering" him for almost fifty years now.

In his 2003 paper "Ethics and Ontology", Taylor is particularly bothered by the ways in which morality and value are characteristically approached in our "post-Galilean age", but also by the fact that it isn't at all clear what a "hoped-for reconciliation between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology" would look like. If naturalist approaches falter, to what, then, *are* we committed to ontologically "by our ethical views and commitments"?

Rather than trying to deal with this question directly, this presentation wants to, first of all, critically investigate whether Taylor's sustained opposition to naturalism is warranted. What does he mean, exactly, with "post-Galilean naturalism"? And is this kind of naturalism still in vogue today? I will be answering the latter question positively by showing how, not only within contemporary philosophy of mind, but also in the dominant models of cognitive science, explanations are still provided in terms consonant with post-Galilean natural science. More specifically, I will be focusing on the way human agency is being conceived of here. By drawing on arguments from Taylor's "What is Human Agency?" (and other papers), I want to show, secondly, how these accounts not so much explain what actions or agency are – our basis of morality – but rather, that these accounts themselves completely rely on a pre-theoretic understanding of ourselves as moral beings. What I will try to show, in short, is that these accounts, in attempting to answer the question of what we are committed to ontologically by our ethical views, are themselves already committed to a pre-theoretic moral understanding without which these accounts couldn't even begin to make sense.

Dave Ward (University of Edinburgh)

Ethics, Ontology and Embodied Expression: Taylor and Merleau-Ponty on Phenomenology and Naturalism

What do our ethical views commit us to ontologically? In "Ethics and Ontology" (henceforth *ET*) Taylor (2003) argues that everyday ethical language and thought rules out a "bald naturalist" (McDowell 1994) conception of the human world, and perhaps more permissive naturalisms too. The sense of ethical concepts can depend on a background moral ontology (perhaps only implicitly and inarticulately held), and it might be that the sense which some ethical concepts have in the context of our lives can only be given against a background ontology incompatible with post-Galilean naturalism.

I want to explore how Taylor's persuasive moral phenomenology can be reconciled with naturalist ontology using the work of a Taylor touchstone absent from *ET* – Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology also demonstrates the inadequacy of mechanistic and reductionist conceptions of experienced value and significance, whilst remaining motivated by a thoroughgoing naturalism that sees humans as essentially biological organisms in commerce with the natural world.

Near the end of *ET* (pp.318-9), Taylor argues that the "higher" values constitutive of our ethical thought must be seen as *strongly* emergent from – and thus irreducible to – the elements of a post-Galilean scientific world with which naturalists must attempt to reconcile them. He pointedly asks "But once you accept strong emergence to account for human ethics and culture, then why not also on lower levels as well?" (*ET* pp.319-20) – that is, if there are non-natural properties that emerge from enculturated human activity, might they not emerge elsewhere too? Without an answer to this question, any claim to naturalism appears unprincipled.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), I will argue, suggests an answer. The properties of significance and value that characterize human experience essentially depend on intersubjective and enculturated patterns of embodied interaction, without being reducible to those habits. Naturalism is preserved, since the dynamics of those patterns and their roots in social and biological studies can be scientifically explored and described. Properties that transcend these natural roots are possible because of the central phenomenon – for both Merleau-Ponty and Taylor – of embodied expression. Like McDowell (1994), Merleau-Ponty tries to understand the emergence of meaning from human activity in a way that neither appeals to blind mechanism, nor to an unexplained constitutive power. The meanings expressed by our activities emerge from our embodied habits without being reducible to them, and are drawn from us by structures in the world that don't yet have the significance that our activity will imbue on them. Because of this, our evaluative world *does* essentially implicate more than the post-Galilean ontology contains – but it does so in a way that is consistent with, and can be illuminated by, the human sciences.

In articulating these connections between Taylor, Merleau-Ponty, ontology and phenomenology, one of my aims is to implicate Taylor in the current embodied, embedded and enactive turn in philosophy of cognitive science. Another is to begin to explore the implications of that turn for our conceptions of ethics and value.

Nicholas Smith (Macquarie University)

Ordinary Life between Ethics and Ontology

My paper will look at the relation between ethics and ontology as it appears in Taylor's account of the moral significance of ordinary life. The idea of an affirmation of ordinary life, i.e. "the life of production and reproduction", plays a central role in the argument of *Sources of the Self*, since it captures something crucial about the distinctive moral sense that belongs to the modern identity, while at the same time making possible the slide to an "ethics of inarticulacy" that came to surround this new moral outlook. But what exactly does ordinary life mean? And what do our views about this specific value commit us to ontologically? I will argue that Taylor provides multiple, not always consistent, answers to the first question and that the form of his answer to the second question is unduly theological.