At Home in the World: Socrates and Charles Taylor on Situating the Human

“... I have become a question to myself. ...” St. Augustine, *Confessions*

“For a human being, the unexamined life is not worth living.” Plato, *Apology of Socrates*

The question of human nature is central for Christian faith, because of our belief that human beings are made in “the image and likeness of God.” Our self-understanding is a critical part of how we understand, or better, how we are able to understand the nature of God. It is particularly important for Christians who believe that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. A reduced or belittled conception of human being neither does justice to human personhood nor to the God in whose image we have been created.

The question of human personhood has been a crucial part of the thought of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, for much of his long and productive career. In both his earlier essays, *Human Agency and Language Philosophical Papers I*¹ as well as in his magisterial, *Sources of the Self*² and *A Secular Age*³, he has tirelessly grappled with the task of articulating an adequate “philosophical anthropology.”⁴ Taylor sees a fundamental threat to a proper understanding of human nature coming from the dominance of the natural sciences. He is not railing against science *per se*, but only science-inspired, reductive frameworks that reduce the person, as a whole, to a biological drive, function or some aspect of the brain and its workings.⁵

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⁴ *Philosophical Papers I*, 1.
⁵ A well-known example of this is Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994). On page three, Crick defines his book’s title: “The Astonishing Hypothesis is that ‘You,’ your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased: ‘You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.’ This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people today that it can truly be called astonishing.”
Taylor also finds this sort of scientism troubling because it deliberately excises the person and her or his experiences from the field of legitimate inquiry, indeed, it views such experiences as an obstruction to a valid grasp of human nature,

...this same basic objectivist orientation rather expresses itself in the perspective of a reductive explanation of human action and experience in physiological and ultimately in physical and chemical terms. In this way we shall be able to treat man, like everything else, as an object among other objects, characterizing him purely in terms of properties which are independent of his experience—in this case, his self-experience; and treat the lived experience of, for example, sensation as epiphenomenon, or perhaps as a misdescription of what is really a brain-state.\(^6\)

This sort of systematic excision is fueled by a model of scientific thinking that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and still earlier, to the atomism of Galileo and Democritus. More on this later. This Procrustean paradigm excludes not only the person as a subject of experience, but includes the working assumption that questions of value or the good are solely human projections onto a neutral, valueless, alien nature. The human perspective is discriminated against on the grounds that it is merely a subjective “appearance” and is hence not worthy of the objective status of the real demanded by the sciences. Taylor opposes this stance on the grounds that it does not do justice to human experience and leaves us bereft of any language by which we may give an account of how we actually live our lives.\(^7\)

The issues Taylor is wrestling with were adumbrated long ago in Plato’s dialogue, \textit{Phaedo}. Taylor is attempting to do for our time, what Socrates was doing for his friends, in his time. Having been condemned by the Athenians for his philosophic activities, Socrates is awaiting execution by the ancient equivalent of lethal injection. He will drink a cup of poisonous hemlock and die. But before doing so, he will spend the day in friendly conversation considering the relation of soul to body and life after death. He is attempting to articulate an

\(^6\) Papers I, 47.
\(^7\) Sources, 58.
adequate philosophic anthropology of his own. At one point in the dialogue, a disciple named Simmias poses a serious challenge to Socrates’ position on the independence of the soul from the body, with depressing implications for life after death (Phaedo 88c). Socrates’ response addresses questions about personal identity and his quest for the good amidst answering Simmias’ challenge regarding the soul/body relationship.

Following the cues of David Roochnik and Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, I will argue that Simmias’s objections to Socrates’ position on the relation of soul and body anticipate the position of neuroscience on the person. This approach is anachronistic and both Roochnik and Newberger Goldstein are aware of this, yet the form of Simmias’ objection fits the basic pattern of neuroscience’s reductive program, dismissing personal subjectivity as either illusory (“epiphenomenal”) or lost within a welter of impersonal causes related to the brain and its chemistry. Further, Simmias’ challenge can lead to the evaporation of questions of the good when moral agency is displaced by mechanistic interpretations of human valuation. Reductionist versions of human personhood and their consequent eclipse of value is a very real challenge coming from neuroscience. My purpose in beginning with Plato is that he forcefully articulates the science-inspired take on the person Taylor is interested in exploring and opposing.

On his last day, Plato depicts Socrates’s friends as riddled with anxiety on his behalf and fearful for themselves. Socrates jokes that they have a childish fear that if a strong wind blows when the soul exits the body, it will be scattered to pieces (diaphusa kai diaskedannusin 77d8-e1). One of Socrates’ followers, Kebes, quips that Socrates should not so much try to convince them, as adults, not to fear death as to address the child within them (eni tis kai en hemin pais

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hostis ta toiauta phobeitai 77e5) who fears death like the “Boogey Man.” (ta mormolukeia 77e7). Socrates begins his argument proper with the claim that there are two kinds of beings (duo eide ton onton 79a6), visible and invisible. The body belongs to the visible realm, the soul, the invisible and while the visible body is bound for death and liable to break down (thneto . . . dialuto, 80b4), but the invisible soul is deathless and incapable of dissolution (athanato . . . adialuto 80b1). More than in other dialogues, Socrates insists on the independence of soul from body in order to secure its immortality and to allay his friends’ anxiety over his impending death. Plato, himself, passionately believed that after death the just person (Socrates) would live a blessed, god-like life among the Absolutes he called Forms (Eide). After Socrates rounds off his argument on the immortality of the soul he addresses the objections of Simmias.

Simmias argues that the soul has the same relation to the body as an attunement (harmonia) does to a lyre. As long as the lyre is in tune with itself it produces beautiful and divine music (pagkalon ti kai theion 85e5-86a1). But if you break the lyre or cut the strings, the music must also be lost (ten de harmonian apololenai ten tou theiou te kai athanatou homophue te kai suggene 86a8-b2). Simmias argues that the soul, like the music of the lyre, is dependent upon the body. The soul—thought, emotion, desire, intention, belief, moral awareness—is the body’s “music.” As such, it depends upon a body that is functioning well, or, in the language of the analogy, “attuned.” If our body loses its proper balance, goes “slack” ((hotan chalasthe to soma hemon ametros 86c3-4) and becomes “overstretched” by illness and other bad influences ((epitathe hupo noson kai allon kakon 86c4), the soul must, straightway, perish (ten emen psuchen anagke euthus huparchhei apololenai 86c5). Simmias concludes that even though it is
most divine, the soul’s (*kaiper ousan theiotaten* 86c5-6) dependence upon a properly functioning body \(^9\) means it is the first casualty of death.

Simmias is proposing a materialist account of the soul.\(^10\) The soul is nothing but the manifestation of a body that is functioning well. Thus, what Socrates takes to be his self, his moral identity, is, rejected by neuroscience which looks only to brain function. The soul *may appear* to exercise causal agency, but the soul according to neuroscience is epiphenomenal, with no genuine causal influence in its own right.

Suzanne Cunningham defines epiphenomenalism in this way,

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\text{... one’s mental properties—like consciousness, beliefs, and so forth—play no role at all in causing one’s behavior. On such a view, our behavior would be the outcome of purely physical processes and laws, while our conscious beliefs and desires would be the quite useless and irrelevant offshoots of those processes. They would amount to little more than mental shadows that can appear but that have no function whatsoever.} \]^{11}

Patricia and Paul Churchland offer their own brand of epiphenomenalism, a position called eliminative physicalism. This form of physicalism claims, not only, that mental states depend upon brain states, but seeks to eliminate persons as the subjects of such mental states,

It [eliminative physicalism] argues that there are no such things as mental states like beliefs, desires, and so forth. From the point of view of the Eliminativist, terms like ‘belief’ or ‘desire’ refer to nothing at all. They are elements in an outdated, no longer plausible, theory called “Folk Psychology.” They should be dropped completely in favor of straightforward neuroscience. The idea is that when neuroscience is completed it will

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\(^9\) Here, Simmias calls the soul’s dependence upon the body a “mingling” (*krasis* 86d2) of the soul with the body.

\(^10\) *Retrieving the Ancients*, 96.

\(^11\) Suzanne Cunningham, *What is a Mind? An Integrative Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2000), 35. T. H. Huxley (great grandfather of Aldous Huxley) interpreted animal consciousness epiphenomenally, only to extend it to the human realm, “The consciousness of brutes would appear to be related to the mechanism of their body simply as a collateral product of its working, and to be completely without any power of modifying that working, as the steam-whistle which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine is without influence upon its machinery. Their volition, if they have any, is an emotion *indicative* of physical changes, not a *cause* of such changes... to the best of my judgment, the argumentation which applies to brutes holds equally good of men... We are conscious automata.” As quoted in, Andre Kukla and Joel Walmsley, *Mind: A Historical and Philosophical Introduction to the Major Theories* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2006), 9.
turn out that there are no states of the brain that correspond with what we have been
calling beliefs, desires, and so on.\textsuperscript{12}

In her fascinating portrait of philosophers Patricia and Paul Churchland, Larissa MacFarquhar,
discusses how the couple aim to displace the terms of “folk psychology”\textsuperscript{13} with a new language
accommodated to a neuroscientific understanding of the self.

It’s been a long time since Paul Churchland read science fiction, but much of his work is
focused far into the future, in territory that is almost completely imaginary. For instance,
both he and Pat like to speculate about a day when whole chunks of English, especially
the bits that constitute folk psychology, are replaced by scientific words that call a thing
by its proper name rather than some outworn metaphor. Surely this will happen, they
think, and as people learn to speak differently they will learn to experience differently,
and sooner or later even their most private introspections will be affected. Already Paul
feels pain differently than he used to: when he cuts himself shaving now he feels not
“pain” but something more complicated—first the sharp, superficial A-delta-fibre pain,
and then, a couple of seconds later, the sickening, deeper feeling of C-fibre pain that
lingers. The new words, far from being reductive or dry, have enhanced his
sensations, he feels, as an oenophile’s complex vocabulary enhances the taste of wine.\textsuperscript{14}

It’s important, for our purposes, to note how Paul Churchland translates his private, first- person
experience of pain into a generalized, third-person account.\textsuperscript{15} His assumption is that naming the
various kinds of neuronal firings involved in the human experience of pain is sufficient to capture
the feeling of pain. But this is mystification and sleight of hand on Churchland’s part. He
simply fails to perceive the explanatory gap between the language of neurons and the language
of experience.\textsuperscript{16} What would we say, for example, to the neuroscientist who, upon handing us an

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{What is a Mind?} 27.
\textsuperscript{13} A somewhat condescending term used to capture how everyday folk employ language, unreflectively, using terms
that refer to mental states like intentions, beliefs and desires.
\textsuperscript{14} Larissa MacFarquhar, “Two Heads, A Marriage Devoted to the Mind-Body Problem,” \textit{The New Yorker} Feb. 12,
2007, 69.
\textsuperscript{15} It is puzzling to me that Churchland claims that this new way of describing pain enhances how it feels. Of course,scientifically speaking, it is more complex in its differentiating between kinds of neuronal firings. Still, the so-called folk
psychologic account is much richer and informative in capturing, first-hand, what pain feels like.
\textsuperscript{16} Raymond Tallis writes in \textit{The Explicit Animal:} “The power of neuromythology resides in the subtlety with which
it juggles descriptive terms. Neurophysiological observations seem to provide an explanation of perception only
because those observations are described in increasingly mentalistic terms as one proceeds from the periphery to the
MRI of our brain with certain lobes “lit up” declares, “There’s your experience of lemonade!”

Of course, there’s no denying that the brain is intimately involved in our experiences. Still, with his proposed mechanical circumlocutions, Churchland is trying to do an “end run” around himself, the subject of his own experience. But this won’t do because there is someone who is the occasion of this experience, indeed, someone “behind” the suggestion that his experience of pain can be better captured by this new, impersonal vocabulary!¹⁷

MacFarquhar treats us to an entertaining example of this revolutionary linguistic transition/translation when Patricia Churchland comes home, one afternoon, frustrated and angry,

Paul and Pat, realizing that the revolutionary neuroscience they dream of is still in its infancy, are nonetheless already preparing themselves for this future, making the appropriate adjustments in their everyday conversation. One afternoon recently, Paul says, he was home making dinner when Pat burst in the door, having come straight from a frustrating faculty meeting. “She said, ‘Paul, don’t speak to me, my serotonin levels have hit bottom, my brain is awash in glucocorticoids, my blood vessels are full of adrenaline, and if it weren’t for my endogenous opiates I’d have driven the car into a tree on the way home. My dopamine levels need lifting. Pour me a Chardonnay, and I’ll be down in a minute.’ ” Paul and Pat have noticed that it is not just they who talk this way—their students now talk of psychopharmacology as comfortably as of food.¹⁸

There are (at least!) two things fascinating about this outburst. First, there is no mention, here, of the grounds of Churchland’s frustration. She simply registers her emotions in this artificial, semi-clinical way. Presumably, there is some moral basis for her anger, an injustice committed

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¹⁷ Is there a performative contradiction, here?

that has been ignored or poorly addressed. But we hear none of this, and indeed, it is important to note that such a mechanical, chemical expression of her anger is singularly out of sync with the language of moral outrage. Given the language she is committed to, the moral dimension of her anger and frustration must remain inarticulate. Secondly, Churchland seems to be blithely unconcerned that her own language is an inconsistent amalgam of first and third person perspectives. Perhaps, she has simply not yet successfully purged the language of personal experience from her vocabulary? As in the shaving passage above, we wish to know who it is that is saying these things and who is being addressed. If the eliminative materialist program is to be taken seriously there can be no morally outraged subject of this outburst, only the mute swirl of electrochemistry.\textsuperscript{19} Who, then, is behind this program to purge our language of its subjective elements?

Socrates offers a two-pronged reply to this question of “who?” In the \textit{Phaedo}, Socrates argues that Simmias’ position on soul does not admit of qualitative distinctions among the souls of different people, only quantitative ones.\textsuperscript{20} Soul is generated by the harmony of body and that is all there is to it. No “harmony” can be better than another. Thus, qualitative distinctions between souls such as “kindly” and “mean-spirited” cannot be derived from the mere quantity of matter of the body or bodily parts. We might try to derive such qualitative distinctions between individuals by saying that A has a greater amount of oxytocin\textsuperscript{21} in her blood stream than B, and

\textsuperscript{19}The point is well made by Stuart J. Judge, Faraday Paper No. 16, p.2, “Nothing but a pack of neurons?” \url{www.faraday-institute.org}: “Suppose for the sake of argument that one accepted the view that consciousness is an epiphenomenon or illusion and that neuronal mechanisms are the only real thing about us as agents. Then we have no way of expressing that conclusion, because all such ratiocination is superfluous. In other words strong reductionism, like other forms of materialism, impales itself on its own sword. If we are ‘nothing but a pack of neurons’ then there is no one to make that assertion.” (my emphasis) See also \textit{Plato at the Googleplex}, 419, for a dramatic enactment of Judge’s same point.

\textsuperscript{20}Retrieving the Ancients, 95-96.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Touching a Nerve}, 93-102. Churchland tells us that oxytocin is “a very potent hormone” secreted by the hypothalamus which, along with vasopressin, plays an important role in a mother feeling affection and attachment to
so is kind, or at least kinder than B, who has a smaller amount in her blood stream and so is mean-spirited. While this explanation of different oxytocin levels may be true, Socrates would not find it sufficient. He rejects any such attempt to collapse qualitative differences into material quantities. Our recognition of the qualitative difference between virtuous and vicious people is an evaluative judgment that regards the character and way of life of the one as admirable and the character and way of life of the other as miserable. Such evaluative judgments are a part of our everyday social lives and are an indispensable part of what it is to be human.\textsuperscript{22}

To say moral judgments are only the contingencies of the distribution of material quantities would be, for Socrates, to obliterate the possibility of making moral evaluations, altogether.

Socrates also tells a personal story about himself, a tantalizing bit of autobiography about his youthful search for the material causes of things, the very sort of cause that Simmias is now proposing to Socrates in his challenge about the relation of body and soul. Interestingly, one of the questions Socrates investigated was this:

\begin{quote}
Is it the blood by which we think, or air or fire, or none of these? Is it the brain that furnishes us our sense perceptions of hearing and seeing and smelling, and memory and opinion come from these things. . . .? (96b4-7, my translation)
\end{quote}

We can see, here, that Socrates is not unpracticed in the sort of challenge Simmias is posing. Roochnik perceptively claims that Socrates’ use of personal narrative, here, is a performative challenge to Simmias’ implication that if soul is nothing but a bit of matter, then personal experience is irrelevant in giving an account of ourselves.\textsuperscript{23} By furnishing this narrative Socrates helps us see how central our story is to our identity, and how much that identity is related to the

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Retrieving the Ancients}, 96.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 97-98
question of the good which motivates us. In short, we cannot arrive at an adequate sense of ourselves, from the third person perspective, but must give personal experience and self-interpretation their moment. This perspective is what Socrates is getting at when he later declares that he was, by nature, unsuited to this one-dimensional study of nature.24

What, then, was Socrates after? Restless from his study of nature, he says that, one day, he heard someone reading from a book by the philosopher-cosmologist, Anaxagoras. Socrates hears that Anaxagoras argues that Mind orders and is the cause of all things (nous estin ho diakosmon te kai panton aitios 97c1-2). Socrates says that he was pleased (hesthen, 97c2) with this type of cause because it implied that there was conscious intention (Mind) behind the order of nature and that Mind not only ordered all things but did so in whatever way was best (tithenai taute hope an beltista eche 97c5-6). Socrates believes that whoever studied nature in this way would know why it was best for a thing to act or be acted upon, and armed with this knowledge, would also know why something happened for better or worse (anagkaion de einai ton auton touton kai to cheiron eidenai 97d4).25

However, Socrates tells us that his great hopes evaporated when he read Anaxagoras and found that he made no use of Mind (to men no ouden chromenon 98b8-9) and didn’t attribute any causality to it in the ordering of things, but referred, instead, to the same material, mechanical causes that Socrates found unsatisfactory in his earlier investigations into nature (96c1-2). Socrates sets out his fundamental complaint against the natural sciences in their

24 Retrieving the Ancients, 98. Roochnik nicely indicates Socrates’ pun on his own nature being out of sync with the study of nature. In the end, Socrates’ nature was unsuited to the scientific study of nature because it made no provision for the human perspective, especially the search for the good.

25 Of course, this is just the sort of teleological, anthropocentric thinking about nature that was banished at the dawn of the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. As we shall see, Taylor’s search for an adequate philosophic anthropology is connected with retrieving the human perspective in its search for the good, within a scientific methodology that “disenchants” the world by excision of the human perspective.
account of the real: they make no provision for the human, especially how human beings interpret their lives in relation to some good. To say, like Anaxagoras, that Mind governs all things for the best and then to talk of nothing but material causes, Socrates says, is absurd (atopon 99a5). It’s like someone claiming that Socrates does everything by means of mind (Sokrates panta hosa prattei no prattei 98c3-4) and then, when giving an account of the reasons why (tas aitias 98c5) he is sitting in jail, talks of nothing but bones, joints, and sinews, and how they must be arranged in a way that he can bend his limbs (chalonta kai suntseinonta ta neura kamptesthai pou poiei hoion t’einai eme nun ta mele 98d3-5). These material, mechanical reasons may be necessary, but they are far from sufficient as an account of why Socrates is in jail (99b2-4). Socrates quips that if the only thing keeping him in jail were his bones and sinews, he would have been off to Megara or among the Boeotians, long ago! So, what is an adequate account, for Socrates? It must include his own understanding of the meaning of his act, and that is unthinkable without reference to the good. Thus, Socrates says that the true reason (tas hos alethos aitias legein 98d8) he is sitting in jail is that when the Athenians decided it was better to condemn him (Athenaiois edoxe beltion einai emou katapsephisasthai 98d9-10), he thought it more just to remain and to undergo whatever penalty they ordered (dikaioteron paramenonta hupecchein ten diken hen an keleusosin 98e3-4). Socrates views his life as a quest to know and live in accord with the good. His study of nature in the merely materialist framework hindered him in his quest to know himself and the natural order. This, he claims, is what made him unsuitable for the study of nature—he, literally, found no place for himself. This issue has only deepened in our own day.

26 Literally, “placeless.” It’s interesting to think of the resonances of Plato’s choice of words, here. In some sense, it is “absurd” because it provides, in its scheme of things, no place for the human.
II

One of the fundamental disputes in philosophy, today, is whether scientific naturalism is such a complete explanatory framework that it envelops the human perspective, making such notions as consciousness, intentionality and value redundant.27 This view is exactly what Socrates is concerned to deny in the passages considered above. Taylor, like Socrates, is deeply concerned with affirming the rightful place of the human perspective in relation to the scientific framework. His approach is phenomenological, that is, he begins with how things appear (from the Greek, *phainomena*) to us. Hence, everyday language about human identity, feelings, judgments concerning the best sort of life to live are not belittled as “folk psychology,” but regarded as serious starting points for reflection and action.

Taylor traces the beginnings of the judgment that the human perspective is a mere appearance, and unworthy of objective status to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Here, the well-known distinction of classical modern philosophy between primary and secondary qualities was central to the methodology of the natural sciences. David Hume writes,

> The fundamental principle of that [modern] philosophy is the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind derived from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects. . . For upon removal of sounds, colours, heat, cold and other sensible qualities, from the rank of continued independent existences, we are reduced merely to what are called primary qualities, as the only real ones, of which we have any

adequate notion. These primary qualities are extension and solidity, with their different mixtures and modifications; figure, motion, gravity, and cohesion.\textsuperscript{28}

The basic idea is that, so-called, secondary qualities exist only as a function of the world’s interaction with the human sensory apparatus. Things like color, sound, heat, etc., are regarded as a human projection onto an, otherwise, alien, neutral world. Transposed to the moral sphere, this becomes Hume’s famous is/ought distinction. Hume highlights the divide between the realm of sheer fact bereft of any value, existing \textit{in tandem} with the realm of human meaning and value. For Hume, no matter of fact can ever add up to a moral judgment of value since the two realms are radically separate.\textsuperscript{29}

This is an important moment in the history of thought not only for its consequences for the rise of science, but also for human self-understanding. What it implies is that taking up a truly “objective” stance toward the world requires ridding oneself of the anthropocentric bias. This bias was perceived by many seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers as coming from Aristotle and his phenomenological conception of science. Of course, for its purposes, such a move was necessary and correct. It was not possible to consider the world in the manner of the

\textsuperscript{28}David Hume, \textit{A Treatise of Human Nature} Vol. I, IV, iv “Of the Modern Philosophy,” (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, LTD, 1911) 216-217. In his \textit{The Assayer}, Galileo had made this same distinction in his famous thought experiments of moving one’s hand over a statue \textit{versus} over a living person, and drawing a piece of paper or a feather over various parts of the body.

Galileo’s position is dependent upon a still earlier philosopher, the founder of Greek Atomism, Democritus. It was he who first introduced the ancestral notion behind the distinction between primary and secondary qualities: “By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colored, but in reality atoms and void. \textit{(nomo gluku kai nomo pikron nomo thermon, nomo psychron nomo chroie, etee de atoma kai kenon, Against the Professors, 7.135=68B9)}.” The idea seems to be, here, that the real world, consisting of atoms and void, is radically other than our perceptual apparatus would lead us to believe. Our senses, conventionally taken to be our primary access to the real becomes, with Democritus, an impenetrable veil interposing itself between us and the world as it is, in itself.

\textsuperscript{29}See David Hume, \textit{A Treatise of Human Nature}, Bk. III, Pt. I, Sec. II in \textit{Moral Philosophy}, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006) ,77. In this passage Hume explicitly identifies virtue and vice with secondary qualities, “Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compare’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind. And this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences.” Later, in the same passage, Hume notes the error of those who, unaccountably, use the terms, \textit{ought or ought not}, having unempirically and hence illegitimately derived them from “the usual copulations of propositions, \textit{is} and \textit{is not}...”
The burgeoning sciences, i.e., quantitatively, mechanistically, mathematically, until one first banished the human perspective. But, the central issue for both Socrates and Taylor is how to continue to talk about ourselves and our relation to the good in a “disenchanted” world.  

For Taylor, the way to situate the human is through what he calls the BA principle, the principle of “the best account.” This principle requires some explanation. In the opening pages of Sources of the Self, Taylor discusses two different takes on our “gut” reactions toward respect for the dignity and integrity of human beings. One interpretation is that our reactions can be explained “almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling. . . .” This instinctual perspective is, perhaps, best represented by the sociobiologist, E. O. Wilson,

> Like everyone else, philosophers measure their personal emotional responses to various alternatives as though consulting a hidden oracle. That oracle resides in the deep emotional centers of the brain, most probably within the limbic system. . . Human emotional responses and the more general ethical practices based on them have been programmed to a substantial degree by natural selection over thousands of generations.

This sort of reductionist interpretation of ethical judgment is a commonplace among sociobiologists. The second way of understanding our moral “gut” reactions is as the perception of a genuine property inhering in human beings, a property which rightfully elicits such a reaction. Taylor says that there are various “ontological accounts” of what this respect or dignity is grounded in: “being creatures of God, or emanations of divine fire, or agents of rational

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30 Sources, 17. The term is from Max Weber. Taylor tells us that Weber used it to refer to the way in which the cosmos, as viewed through science, lost its resonance as embodying “a meaningful order. . . .”
31 Ibid., 58.
32 Ibid., 5.
33 Ibid., 5
choice. . .” The main point is that the first interpretation treats our reaction as just a brute fact or an unwarranted projection, the second treats our reaction as perceiving a good or value that merits the reaction we have. Taylor vigorously supports the second interpretation, but also wishes to lay bare the forces pushing for the first.

As we have already seen, Socrates claimed that the language of scientific, mechanical causes was utterly inadequate to account for why he went to jail and chose to remain there to his death. Similarly, Taylor argues that the language of naturalism cannot address such things as human agency, dignity, or what a meaningful life consists in. The framework of naturalism insists that we either abandon this sort of language or “translate” it into the idiom of the sciences, i.e., treat these terms as “counters” or “illusions” within the framework of natural selection or that of neurochemistry. This is the program of the Churchlands, Wilson and a host of others who claim the sufficiency of the naturalist framework. But this program, Taylor claims, is “changing the subject,” for the questions that human beings seek to answer within their framework of meaning cannot only be addressed by the third-person perspective of the sciences. The cataloguing of mechanical interactions, no matter how exhaustive, will not add up to the quality of human agency. The train on those tracks just won’t get you there. And while this seventeenth century bias against the language of meaning and value may have been appropriate for the objects of a mathematicised nature, it cannot, legitimately, claim hegemony over the human realm, too.

35 Sources, 7.
36 Ibid., 6.
37 Ibid., 58. The phrase is, as Taylor notes, that of Donald Davidson.
Human beings, Taylor insists, cannot dispense with talk of meaning and the good, for it is this language that inevitably and appropriately signifies the properties we seek to address when talking about our lives:

What we need to explain is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn’t fit some model of “science” and that we know a priori that human beings must be explicable in this “science”. This begs the question. How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory until we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?38

This statement contains the central elements of Taylor’s “best account,” or “BA principle.”39 The language we use, he argues, to make the best sense of our lives “trumps” any other language presumed (by the naturalist position) to be superior in rendering our lives more transparent to us. Taylor, thus, consciously flips the legacy of the seventeenth century on its head. The impersonal account may be appropriate to the study of objects, but when it comes to human beings, it is often unhelpful and unrevealing. And, since we cannot help but talk about ourselves without recourse to the language of moral evaluation it is the language of the sciences that must be left behind when talking about ourselves, not the language of value or the first-person perspective. Of course, Taylor is not claiming that the sciences have nothing informative to tell us about our nature as biological beings. He is simply retrieving the first-person perspective from being eclipsed by the sciences. As with Socrates above, the natural sciences may be a necessary part of any account of the human animal, but they can never be sufficient for addressing what are characteristically human concerns. Taylor, unapologetically, upholds the rightful place of the first-person, human perspective as equally valid as the third-person, naturalist perspective.

38 Sources, 58.
39 Ibid., 58.
Of course the terms of our best account will never figure in a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. This is the complement to the anti-Aristotelian purge of natural science in the seventeenth century. Just as physical science is no longer anthropocentric, so human science can no longer be couched in the terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter form that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with.\(^4\)

Taylor’s BA principle connects up with his earlier essay, “Self-Interpreting Animals,”\(^4\) in holding that human beings cannot be sufficiently understood without taking into account how they understand themselves. The language of self-interpretation is the only one that respects the human need to understand ourselves in relation to our identity, and the question of the good. In his essay, he discusses these issues through an analysis of the central role of the emotions as modes of access to the good. It will be helpful in filling out Taylor’s project to take a brief look at this.

Taylor’s understanding of the emotions is similar to Aristotle’s in that emotions are not regarded as irrational, biological events, but as having a cognitive dimension.\(^4\) Emotions pick out the meanings, values, desires or purposes at stake for a subject in a given situation. The things discerned by our feelings are what Taylor calls “imports,”

\[\ldots\] experiencing a given emotion involves experiencing our situation as bearing a certain import, where for the ascription of the import it is not sufficient just that I feel this way, but rather the import gives the grounds or basis for the feeling.\(^4\)

\(^4\) Sources, 59.
\(^4\) Philosophical Papers I, 45-76.
\(^4\) See Aristotle, On Rhetoric, A Theory of Civic Discourse, transl. by George A. Kennedy, (New York: Oxford, 1991), Bk. 2, Chapter 2, 124-125. Aristotle defines anger (orge) as arising on account of a perceived slight: “Let anger be [defined as] desire, accompanied by [mental and physical] distress, for conspicuous retaliation because of a conspicuous slight that was directed, without justification, against oneself or those near to one.”
\(^4\) Philosophical Papers I, 49.
Feelings are modes of perception and evaluation, evoked as a consequence of registering certain imports. For Taylor, imports come from a world that is subject-centered. They have no place in the world of objects, because things don’t matter to objects, whereas they do to subjects. If our world is partly mediated by the meaning coming to us from the imports our feelings register, then human behavior cannot be explained solely through an external point of view, (e.g., the data from an MRI employed by neuroscience).

What it is like to be a center of moral agency is uncaptrueable by the methods of empirical science. While uncovering the causal mechanisms and intelligibilities of the physical world is the great strength of science, it is also its built-in limitation. By its very nature, science is “imprisoned” within the third-person perspective. This means that no matter how exhaustive its discoveries are there will always be that “remainder,” the person, and the project, “left over,” of interpreting the meaning of his/her life. It’s especially in this sense that Taylor sees the scientific project of achieving a final take on the human person as illusory. Illusory because there is no end to the human need for interpretation and re-interpretation. He is arguing that no attempt by the sciences to perform an “end run” around the first-person perspective will enable us to skirt the hard work of personal, self-examination of one’s life.44

Given imports as perceived by the emotions, and the role they play in human life, “... the ideal of an objective account will have been breached.”45 Taylor concedes that there are some emotions, like fear, whose import may be explained, more successfully, from a third-person perspective. However, emotions like shame are, by their very nature, such that they cannot be understood independently of a subject’s point of view,

44 Ibid., 63-64.
45 Ibid., 51.
Shame is an emotion that a subject experiences in relation to a dimension of his existence as a subject. What we can be ashamed of are properties which are essentially properties of a subject... These properties are thus only demeaning for a subject for whom things can have this kind of meaning. But things can have this kind of meaning only for a subject in whose form of life there figures an aspiration to dignity, to be a presence among men which commands respect... Thus the import shameful can be explicated only by reference to a subject who experiences his world in a certain way. And in this the shameful is quite unlike the physically menacing which we discussed earlier.

A person’s feeling of shame may signify imports meriting the description “disgraceful” or “dishonorable” and hence terms like “hypocrite,” “liar,” or “coward” may apply to one’s character.” Of course, shame can be felt for all kinds of reasons, justifiable or not, and Taylor is aware of this. The important point is that it is not possible to understand the import of an emotion like shame from a strictly objective point of view.

As we have seen, then, feelings have a cognitive dimension and are associated with values. They key us into certain meanings about our moral predicament. Note, carefully, in the first quote on imports, above, how Taylor says that the emotions do not, themselves, constitute the import, but detect one. Hence, emotions are not human projections onto an, otherwise, neutral, “value-free,” nature but a mode of perception coming from the first-person domain of human personhood. Taylor sees that feelings help us, not only, to pick out goods, but also to name which goods are higher than others, which goods are genuine, which illusory. The meaning of feelings is inchoate, requires articulation, and re-articulation throughout our lives. But this way of putting it may imply a misleading split between feelings and cognition because Taylor views feelings as coming already bundled with interpretations.

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46 Ibid., 53
47 Ibid., 55.
48 Ibid., 62-63.
49 Ibid. 63.
As we articulate our feelings we are, as it were, knitting ourselves together, trying to make sense of what our feelings tell us about our purposes and goals, and whether we are coming nearer or moving away from them. Such articulations may be taken to be “readings” of ourselves, readings which must be re-visited and re-articulated. There is no sense in which we shall finally “arrive” at a definitive interpretation of what our feelings reveal regarding the imports they signify. There is no place where we can achieve such a godlike interpretive stance, . . . we must speak of man as a self-interpreting being, because this kind of interpretation is not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence. For our feelings always incorporate certain articulations; while just because they do so they open us on to a domain of imports which call for further articulation. The attempt to articulate further is potentially a life-time process. At each state, what we feel is a function of what we have already articulated and evokes the puzzlement and perplexities which further understanding may unravel. But whether we want to take the challenge or not, whether we seek the truth or take refuge in illusion, our self-(mis)understandings shape what we feel. This is the sense in which man is a self-interpreting animal.\(^{50}\)

Feelings are connected to what Taylor calls, “strong evaluation.”\(^{51}\) Strong evaluation is a judgment rooted in feelings or emotions since it is they which signify ways of living, ways of responding, traits of character that are admirable or not so admirable. Such feelings/judgments, then, act as “second-order evaluations”\(^{52}\) of our motivations and actions, that is, they assess what we do or have done in relation to the kind of person we wish to be or wish to avoid being.

Taylor’s example of spite is interesting and illuminating, here,

When I hold back a certain reaction, because it springs from spite, and I see this as base, petty, or bad; or when I feel remorse for not having held it back, or perhaps contempt or disapproval for you when you have acted spitefully; what is involved is a strong evaluation. And the tenor of this evaluation is perhaps something like this: that spite, revenge, returning evil for evil, is something we are prone to, but that there is a higher way of seeing our relations with others; which is higher not just in producing happier consequences—less strife, pain, bad blood—but also in that it enables us to see ourselves

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 65.
\(^{51}\) Ibid. 65-68.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 66-67.
and others more broadly, more objectively, more truly. One is a bigger person, with a broader, more serene vision, when one can act out of this higher standpoint.\textsuperscript{53}

I have not covered all the nuances of Taylor’s paper here, but I think we can see, broadly, how Taylor views the role of the emotions in relation to what he calls, “strong evaluation.” Strong evaluation is rooted in our feelings and is connected to the BA principle in that we cannot help, as human beings, in talking about values and meanings if we are to make sense of who we are. This is part of the substance not only of what it is to be a human being, but what it is to have an identity, since, for Taylor, we continuously understand ourselves in relation to some good, and see ourselves in terms of having come closer to or having moved further away from that good. The person who has no sense of who he or she is in relation to some good, says Taylor, is in the midst of a serious identity crisis.\textsuperscript{54}

We have seen that Socrates and Taylor are in accord in holding that the naturalist framework for understanding human beings is woefully inadequate. The third-person, impersonal perspective of the sciences, whatever their pretensions for completeness and sufficiency, fail to capture the full reality of the first-person perspective of human personhood. That personhood is characterized by language that ineluctably refers to questions of meaning, identity and the good that the naturalist stance is incapable of addressing. Taylor, following Socrates, insists that the first-person point of view has its rightful place, alongside the third-person perspective. While the excising of the anthropocentric view may have been necessary and valid for the birth of science, the naturalist point of view invalidly claims to be the only objective and legitimate viewpoint. This path is not science, but scientism.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 27-32.
Taylor, with Socrates, views his project as one of retrieval, one in which we may re-claim the place of the human point of view as not mere appearance, but as real as the scientific one. The legitimacy of the human point of view accords well with Taylor’s commitment to the dignity of the person stemming from his Christian faith. In this way, both Socrates and Taylor affirm a philosophical anthropology that eschews the reductive stance of scientism, and, for Taylor at least, enables us to understand ourselves in a way that is worthy of one made *imago Dei*. 