

# Is Charles Taylor (Still) a Weak Ontologist?

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*ABSTRACT:* In this paper, I critically discuss Charles Taylor's employment of the concept of ontology by shining a spotlight on a shift in emphasis from an anthropocentric to a non-anthropocentric viewpoint in his more recent writings on ontology. I also argue that Stephen White's characterization of Taylor's 'weak' ontology, while revealing, only partly explains Taylor's position, as White's interpretation leaves no room for the metaphysical thrust in Taylor's thought. Drawing attention to a Taylor left out of White's Taylor, I ultimately seek to show why Taylor's distinctive mode of argumentation is not consonant with White's weak-ontological approach.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Dans cet article, j'aborde la question de la notion d'ontologie chez Charles Taylor. Je constate, dans un premier temps, l'abandon par Taylor du point de vue anthropocentrique, ainsi que l'adoption d'une perspective non-anthropocentrique. Je remets ensuite en question l'interprétation de Stephen White, en insistant sur le fait qu'elle ne parvient pas à mettre en valeur l'inspiration métaphysique de la pensée de Taylor. J'estime, en conclusion, que Taylor s'appuie fondamentalement sur un mode d'argumentation métaphysique qui est sous-estimé lorsqu'on le présente comme un «ontologiste "faible"».

**Keywords:** Charles Taylor, ontology, philosophical anthropology, metaphysics, Stephen White

Given Charles Taylor's status as a key figure in a number of ethical and political debates, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been paid to

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the unity of his writings as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Difficulties arise, however, when considering the massive range of concerns raised and discussed in Taylor's oeuvre. The breadth of his work is unique, ranging as it does from reflections on human nature and moral experience to analyses of the ontological commitments of contemporary secular societies. However, as Taylor himself notes, there is a kind of unity throughout his concerns, despite the wide spectrum of themes.<sup>2</sup>

The tendency to connect rather than to separate philosophical questions is closely related to another characteristic of Taylor's work: his distinctive style of writing. Since the very beginning, he has been developing a terminology that challenges the more familiar terms used by philosophers. This has led to the criticism that his thinking is too "idiosyncratic" or that he "blurs" basic distinctions; but these comments neglect the kind of strategy Taylor actually employs.<sup>3</sup> His thinking typically thrives by providing a set of new concepts (categories, illustrations, and metaphors) that he uses in a variety of ways and in pursuit of different, sometimes conflicting, ends.

Yet, when these elements of Taylor's thought are appreciated, we might ask: what is the actual terrain he has been exploring? In the face of this challenge, I will focus in this paper on a central suggestion made by Stephen White; namely, to see Taylor as an *ontological* thinker more than anything else, since "no thinker today has done more to press broad ontological questions than Charles Taylor."<sup>4</sup> Taylor himself recently described his unusual mode of ontological reasoning as an attempt to develop what he calls an "interwoven type of argument,"<sup>5</sup> that is, to make explicit connections with other philosophical domains to convince us that there has been "a kind of eclipse of ontological

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<sup>1</sup> Abbey, Ruth. *Charles Taylor* (Teddington: Acumen Press, 2000); Smith, Nicholas. *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Redhead, Mark. *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Laitinen, Arto. *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) are illuminating exceptions to this trend.

<sup>2</sup> As Taylor says in the introduction to *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1: "Despite the appearance of variety in the papers published in this collection, they are the work of a monomaniac . . . . If not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda underlies all of them."

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, Paul. *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy. Ethics after Wittgenstein* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 101, 106, and Kymlicka, Will. "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," *Inquiry* 34(2) (1991): 159.

<sup>4</sup> White, Stephen. *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor used this expression to characterize his ontological claims during a seminar at the University of Leuven, Belgium (2 June 2015).

thinking in social theory.”<sup>6</sup> In line with this, his arguments not only combine political theory with ontology, but also have a way of interweaving anthropological and phenomenological reflections with ethical inquiries. It should not surprise us, then, that White identifies Taylor as the central inspiration for his project of rehabilitating ontological reasoning in political theory.

Taylor’s interwoven mode of argumentation has come a long way in the last few decades. He first argues for the close relationship between philosophical anthropology and ethics in the paper “The Moral Topography of the Self,” and then continues to develop this idea by explicitly connecting selfhood and morality in the first part of *Sources of the Self*.<sup>7</sup> However, in this book, Taylor extends his understanding of the ethical even further by introducing the notions of “moral ontology” and “moral phenomenology.”<sup>8</sup> It would seem therefore that, in Taylor’s view, ethics is closely intertwined with philosophical anthropology, ontology, and phenomenology alike.

In addition to these modifications in his view on ethics, Taylor’s more recent writings show a change in his approach to ontology. Although a preoccupation with ontology can be found in earlier works, I will show that it is particularly distinctive of the later Taylor to address ontological questions from a non-anthropocentric perspective.<sup>9</sup> That is, while his previous writings press ontological questions to elaborate a philosophical-anthropological critique of reductionist understandings of human agency, the late writings are motivated by a concern for the *metaphysical* reality that best explains our ethical-political values. How should we understand these new tactics, both Taylor’s aim to ‘interweave’ his different arguments and his renewed approach to ontology?

I explore this question in an ongoing discussion with White’s understanding of Taylor as a ‘weak ontologist.’ White’s weak-ontological approach responds to two concerns: it accepts that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are “contestable” and yet insists that such conceptualizations are “necessary” and “unavoidable” for an adequately reflective ethical and political

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Charles. “Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 185.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, Charles. “The Moral Topography of the Self,” in *Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory*, ed. Stanly Messer et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), and *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 8, 68.

<sup>9</sup> For this point, I am indebted to Fergus Kerr, who already described Taylor’s *Sources* as being “explicitly a ‘retrieval’ of a nonanthropocentric perspective on the good.” Kerr, Fergus, “The Self and the Good. Taylor’s Moral Ontology,” in *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 84. Although neglected by many commentators, I argue that Taylor has since continued along this path.

life.<sup>10</sup> A key element of weak ontology is the rejection of traditional modes of “strong” ontologizing that involve “too much ‘metaphysics.’”<sup>11</sup> In this way, White seeks to sustain affirmation of our ethical-political commitments in a way that acknowledges their contingent and non-metaphysical character at the same time. The aim of this paper is to show that, for three reasons, Taylor does not fit well into this picture. First, White’s weak-ontological interpretation cannot accommodate the non-anthropocentric elements in Taylor’s thought. Second, it misapprehends Taylor’s interwoven mode of argumentation. Third, it ignores the fact that Taylor’s ontology is not merely concerned with political theory, but also with metaphysics. As a result, White’s reading only partly explains Taylor’s rich ontological project; his interpretation leaves no room for the explicit metaphysical thrust in Taylor’s thought.

This paper is divided in six sections. In the first section, I examine Taylor’s general employment of the concept of ontology, while also shining a spotlight on a shift in emphasis from an anthropocentric to a non-anthropocentric viewpoint in his more recent writings on ontology. In the second section, I illustrate White’s conception of weak ontology and discuss his characterization of Taylor in the light of this conception. My analysis then turns from exegesis to critical questioning in an attempt to draw attention to a Taylor left out of White’s Taylor. In the third section, I seek to show that White’s weak-ontological reading glosses over the breadth and argumentative rigor of Taylor’s diverse philosophical views. In the fourth section, then, I argue that White gives a too limited account of Taylor’s interwoven line of thinking. In the fifth section, I continue to elaborate on why Taylor cannot be seen as a weak ontologist. In the concluding sixth section, I reflect on how to understand the crucial difference between White’s and Taylor’s ontologies.

### **1. Taylor’s Non-Anthropocentric Ontologizing**

In *Philosophical Papers*, Taylor generally employs the concept of ontology in what I will call an ‘anthropological’ sense; that is, he uses it to discuss certain (implicit) beliefs about what a human being is and what human agency consists in. This can be illustrated by briefly looking at the papers “How is Mechanism Conceivable?” and “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man.” In the former paper, Taylor criticizes the ‘ontological’ argument of mechanism. That is, he criticizes the thesis that human behaviour must be ultimately explicable in terms of body chemistry and neurophysiology because “human beings are after all physical objects.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the latter paper, he makes the case that we cannot come to understand important dimensions of human life within the

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<sup>10</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> White, Stephen, “Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection,” *Political Theory* 25(4) (1997): 505.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 181.

bounds set by the “ontological” belief that “reality must be susceptible to understanding and explanation by science so understood.”<sup>13</sup>

Taylor pursues another, in this case ‘political,’ type of ontological inquiry in “Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate,” in which he explores the difference between “ontological issues” and “advocacy issues” in social theory.<sup>14</sup> Advocacy issues involve “the moral stand or policy one adopts,” whereas ontological issues concern “what you recognize as the factors you will invoke to account for social life”; that is, “they concern the terms you accept as ultimate in the order of explanation.”<sup>15</sup> From this starting point, though, Taylor largely continues his anthropological use of the concept of ontology by invoking issues of self-understanding. In this way, he characterizes Michael Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* as an “ontological” book in that it shows how different political proposals are “linked with different understandings of self and identity.”<sup>16</sup>

Taylor also develops a familiar type of ontological critique in elaborating on the liberal-communitarian debate, namely, that there is a great deal of motivated suppression of social ontology among liberalists. He generally argues that the issues of advocacy and ontology have been inadequately appreciated. In Taylor’s view, it is not just that the distinction between ontological and advocacy questions remains largely unarticulated, but also that many commentators misperceive the impact of the ontological by neglecting the reality that taking an ontological position helps to “define the options it is meaningful to support by advocacy.”<sup>17</sup> Following a line of thinking drawn largely from *Sources of the Self*, Taylor ultimately argues that “the confusion of issues has contributed to a kind of eclipse of ontological thinking in social theory,” convincing his readers that the debate can only be opened “if we can clarify the ontological issues, and allow the debate between liberals and communitarians to be the complex, many-levelled affair that it really is.”<sup>18</sup>

As these observations make clear, Taylor uses the terms ‘philosophical anthropology’ and ‘ontology’ interchangeably. It is also clear that Taylor does not see contradiction in synchronizing some of his concerns. As he says in a reflection on White’s *Sustaining Affirmation*:

My term “philosophical anthropology” is meant to cover much the same matters as White does with “ontology”: it tries to define certain fundamental features about

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Charles, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” 181.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-182.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 185, 203.

human beings, their place in nature, their defining capacities (language is obviously central to these), and their most powerful or basic motivations, goals, needs, and aspirations.<sup>19</sup>

Taylor's explicit remark that he sees 'philosophical anthropology' and 'ontology' as interchangeable notions has incited some of his readers to conclude that the central focus of Taylor's work has been "the formulation of a philosophical anthropology."<sup>20</sup> Yet one of the limitations of this characterization is that it leaves no room for the important observation that Taylor also "wants to open up a *non-anthropocentric* perspective on the good, to allow us to see the 'sovereignty of good' over the moral agent."<sup>21</sup> It would seem Kerr is on to something important here, because some of Taylor's more recent writings similarly make room for non-human sources of value. As it turns out, the later Taylor goes beyond a mere anthropological use of ontology in the above sense, in a crucial attempt to transcend anthropocentrism in moral thinking. Counting Iris Murdoch and John McDowell as close relatives of this type of effort, Taylor's focus now is to explore the questions of what we are "committed to ontologically by our ethical views and commitments," and "what ontology can underpin our moral commitments."<sup>22</sup> However, Taylor's very endorsement of this Murdochian conception of a good beyond the self gets lost from view by synchronizing his 'anthropocentric' philosophical anthropology and his 'non-anthropocentric' ontology—an inconsistency with which, as we have seen above, Taylor himself has no difficulty.

Taylor's non-anthropocentrism comes to the fore in his more recent writings, in which he argues that we must respond to the following challenge: *either* we correct our (implicit) naturalist ontology, *or* we must revise the most striking features of our moral experience. The attack on naturalism is a central motivation of Taylor's thought. It can generally be seen as a critique of a certain type of understanding of human agency. Taylor initially calls his rival account "philosophical anthropology"—perhaps because of, rather than despite, his impression that "this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy."<sup>23</sup> Taylor's most basic definition depicts naturalism as "a particular view about science and

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, Charles. "The 'Weak Ontology' Thesis," *The Hedgehog Review* 7(2) (2005): 35.

<sup>20</sup> Rosa, Hartmut, and Arto Laitinen, "On Identity, Alienation and the Consequences of September 11th. An Interview with Charles Taylor," in *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, ed. Arto Laitinen and Nicholas Smith (Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland, 2002), 183.

<sup>21</sup> Kerr, "The Self," 84, italics mine.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, Charles, "Ethics and Ontology," *The Journal of Philosophy* 100(6) (2003), 305, and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 607.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 1.

human nature.”<sup>24</sup> More particularly, he describes it as “the belief that we ought to understand human beings in terms continuous with the sciences of extrahuman nature.”<sup>25</sup> In a more recent paper, Taylor adds the notion of “ethical” naturalism, that is, “the view that arises among thinkers for whom seeing humans as part of nature means seeing their behaviour and life form as ultimately explicable in terms that are consonant with modern natural science.”<sup>26</sup> Refuting this approach, Taylor’s main concern is that crucial features of human life just disappear by adopting a scientific stance. Moreover, as Taylor understands it, naturalism is more than a mere *philosophical* doctrine. He sees a broader “naturalist temper” in our Western culture as such, “stopping short frequently of explicit espousal of full-blooded naturalism, but tending to be suspicious of the things that naturalism cannot accommodate.”<sup>27</sup> This observation—that most people are reluctant to fully embrace naturalism and yet remain highly sceptical of all things that do not fit the naturalist model—I want to argue, is *the* underlying theme of Taylor’s “single rather tightly related agenda.”<sup>28</sup>

Against the naturalist trend in contemporary thought, Taylor proposes a view that stresses the difference between human nature and mere physical nature. His critique is that a naturalist ontology cannot accommodate (what he sees as) the most striking features of human reality. As he says, there is a lack of fit between ordinary moral experience and “the ontology we allow ourselves as post-Galilean naturalists:”

Returning to the issue of naturalism, it is clear that this qualitative status of the ethical is a deep source of trouble. . . . it cannot see how values of an incommensurably higher range can have a place in post-Galilean nature. . . . the higher in this sense is one of the things expunged from the cosmos by post-Galilean science. It had its place in the great “chain of being,” but not in the “mechanized” world picture.<sup>29</sup>

Taylor elaborates on this in *Retrieving Realism* by separating what he calls “life meanings, which we share as biological creatures” from “human meanings,”

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<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 531, note 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” 306.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, Charles, “A Most Peculiar Institution,” in *World, Mind, and Ethics. Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. Altham and R. Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 1. See *Sources* for a variation of the same theme: “Many of our contemporaries, while they remain quite unattracted by the naturalist attempt to deny ontology altogether, and while on the contrary they recognize that their moral reactions show them to be committed to some adequate basis, are perplexed and uncertain when it comes to saying what this basis is,” 10.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” 309, 319.

that is, “meanings on a moral, or an ethical, or a spiritual level, having to do with what are seen as the highest goals or the best way of life.”<sup>30</sup> Against this background, Taylor makes two claims: a positive yet hesitant one, and a negative yet confident one. The positive claim states that the attribution of human meanings is not arbitrary, but “in response to something.”<sup>31</sup> However, Taylor emphasizes, we can see this only when we abandon post-Galilean models and reflect on human life on its own terms, since moral meanings are essentially understood to be higher than, or incommensurable with, ordinary natural desires.<sup>32</sup> The negative claim, then, argues that the attempt to reduce human meanings to basic life meanings in an all-inclusive scientific theory seems an “unpromising strategy” since “the basis of our science is the discovery of a universe whose causal laws take no account of us and our human meanings.”<sup>33</sup> In this respect, Taylor has moved from a modest view to a bolder one. Whereas he leaves open the possibility of such a superseding theory in “Ethics and Ontology” by concluding that the “hoped-for-reconciliation” between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology is “somewhat premature,”<sup>34</sup> he later suggests that the studies of physical and human nature invoke incompatible ontological realities:

We may also be seeing signs of a need for two independent accounts of reality, one describing those aspects of nature as it is in itself revealed to detached observers, and another account of reality as it is revealed to involved human beings.<sup>35</sup>

Seen in this light, it is clear that Taylor’s late non-anthropocentrism deviates from the initial philosophical-anthropological question of what characterizes a human agent. Regrettably, Taylor himself does not remark on his change of course, but I want to venture that this explicit rejection of “post-Galilean” metaphysics makes a much bolder claim than his critique of the motivated suppression of social ontology among liberalists. As will emerge in the following sections, it is precisely this non-anthropocentric attack on naturalist ontology that gets obscured from view in White’s weak-ontological interpretation of Taylor. In fact, this issue of terminology is crucial, because Taylor will have to be honest about his own *metaphysical* view in criticizing naturalist ontologies, for these cannot be rejected without reaching out to some ontological contraposition beyond philosophical anthropology or social ontology.

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<sup>30</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert, and Charles Taylor. *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015): 108.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” 308-309, 314.

<sup>33</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 158-159.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” 320.

<sup>35</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 153.



Following Kerr, I therefore suspect that *this* concern revolves neither around philosophical anthropology nor around social ontology, but around a non-anthropocentric perspective on the good. In this regard, Taylor's positions in philosophical anthropology and political theory have eclipsed his attempt to encourage non-anthropocentric thinking in ethics.

The above discussion raises the following question: how should we understand Taylor's interwoven mode of argumentation between philosophical anthropology, political theory, ethics, and ontology? In this regard, several interpreters acknowledge Taylor's tendency to link philosophical issues together.<sup>36</sup> Rather than to insist on traditional categorical distinctions, these commentators adhere to Taylor's characteristic language in elaborating his views. At least two reasons support this approach. First, anyone who attempts to distinguish Taylor's various concerns is in fact "trying to sever themes that resist separation," because Taylor not only combines ethics with ontology, as we have seen, but also has a way of entwining anthropological, political, and phenomenological reflections with his ontology.<sup>37</sup> Second, we also saw that Taylor himself does not see the need to separate his claims, since all these claims are relevant for his central attack on naturalism. Although these considerations suggest that segregating Taylor's views can only be distorting, I think that doing so will not only clarify Taylor's different modes of ontologizing, but also, as will emerge in the following sections, highlight the difficulties in White's picture of Taylor as a weak ontologist.

## **2. White's Characterization of Taylor's Weak Ontologizing**

We can illustrate these issues by looking once more at Taylor's ambivalent use of the notion of ontology. As has been noted, Taylor employs a broad or 'relaxed' notion of ontology, as he uses the terms 'philosophical anthropology' and 'ontology' interchangeably. White approves of this routine when he assures that his own concept of "weak ontology" is "largely appropriate for the kind and level of philosophical reflection [Taylor] has in mind," because Taylor speaks, for example, of "the 'ontology of human life: what kinds of things can you invoke in talking about human beings in the different ways we do: describing, deliberating, judging, etc.?'"<sup>38</sup> In the introduction of this paper, it was noted that weak ontologies, as White understands them, stress the importance of constructing foundations for ethical and political life in the full knowledge of the contestable character of this very foundational enterprise. According to White, Taylor fits well into this picture. In line with this, Paul Saurette suggests that "Taylor follows Kant in avoiding strong ontological claims about the nature of

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<sup>36</sup> See Abbey, *Charles Taylor*; Kerr, "The Self"; Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation*; Saurette, Paul. *The Kantian Imperative: Humiliation, Common Sense, Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); and Smith, *Charles Taylor*.

<sup>37</sup> Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 43.

the world, instead making only weaker transcendental claims about the nature of our embodied subjectivity.”<sup>39</sup>

Against the background of Saurette’s distinction between Taylor’s “weak” transcendental-anthropological claims and the “strong” ontological claims that he allegedly has avoided, it is particularly interesting to examine White’s reading of Taylor in more detail. I will therefore first reconstruct White’s conception of weak ontology and then discuss his interpretation of Taylor in the light of this conception.

What is weak ontology? White endorses this notion mainly to stress the importance of an ontological vision to morality in a way that understands ontology as “prefiguring,” rather than dictating, ethical-political perception and judgment.<sup>40</sup> His key concept of weak ontology is meant to express the contrast with “strong” ontologies that gain their “sense of what is right” in ethical and political life by reference to “‘the way the world is,’ or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is.”<sup>41</sup> Since such traditional ontologies generally “involve too much ‘metaphysics,’” White continues, it is striking of weak ontologies that they do not bear “clear substantive directions for practical life” and yet “these ontologies do provide a figuration of the world that appears to promise at least some orientation or passage to moral-political reflection.”<sup>42</sup> A crucial feature of such weak figurations—besides their non-metaphysical nature—is that they signal their own limits; that is, they incorporate a sense of their own “contestability, fallibility, or partiality.”<sup>43</sup> *Taylor’s* relevance to this contestable yet foundational enterprise, then, is not only that “the way he describes the idea of ‘articulating’ our ‘background pictures’ or ‘frameworks’ is highly instructive,” but also that “no thinker today has done more to press broad ontological questions than Charles Taylor.”<sup>44</sup>

As White understands him, Taylor—while at first portraying him as “a border runner between strong and weak ontology”—is in the end best understood as being “squarely within the terrain of weak ontology.”<sup>45</sup> He therefore defends Taylor against critics who wrongly assume that he is offering a return to strong ontology, that is, “some foundationalist, determinate truth about the shape and direction of self and world.”<sup>46</sup> White does so, first, by emphasizing the

<sup>39</sup> Saurette, *The Kantian Imperative*, 206.

<sup>40</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 11, and “Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues,” *The Hedgehog Review* 7(2) (2005), 22.

<sup>41</sup> White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal,” 505, and *Sustaining Affirmation*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal,” 505-506, and *Sustaining Affirmation*, 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal,” 506, and *Sustaining Affirmation*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal,” 506, and *Sustaining Affirmation*, 43, note 5.

<sup>46</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 43.

weak-ontological character of Taylor's philosophical-anthropological and moral-phenomenological views; second, by interpreting Taylor's categorization of theistic, naturalist, and expressivist moral sources in a weak-ontological fashion; and, third, by clarifying that Taylor integrates elements of Romantic expressivism with theism in a way that broadly supports the idea of weak ontology. As I will make clear in the present section, White strategically appeals to these three aspects of Taylor's thought in a way that presents him as firmly rooted in weak ontology. Although White generally explains Taylor's arguments in an illuminating way, I will argue in the next section that his weak-ontological interpretation of Taylor suffers from serious weaknesses by drawing attention to a Taylor left out of White's Taylor.

White's discussion begins by invoking Taylor's claim that there exists "a kind of eclipse of ontological thinking' in contemporary moral and political theory" and that we need to "rethink the self as part of a 'richer ontology'" to undo this suppression.<sup>47</sup> In White's interpretation, Taylor's "richer ontology" emerges at the background of his philosophical anthropology, that is, Taylor's "internal account of 'what it is to be an agent'" and the claims that "the self is always already engaged, embedded, or situated" and that "human agency is partially, but deeply, constituted by this engagement with the world."<sup>48</sup> Invoking Taylor's "phenomenological account of identity" and the notion of "what is of 'incomparable' importance to us," White further explains Taylor's view that "the peculiar force of the experience of attachment is distinctive to human being."<sup>49</sup> Stepping back from what White calls this "ontological sketch of agency," he then poses the question of how we should understand the "exact philosophical status" of Taylor's view on agency to set the stage for his central claim that Taylor is best understood as a weak ontologist.<sup>50</sup> In answering this question, he first argues that "Taylor deploys an argument of conceptual necessity," while noting some pages later that it also has "something of the sense of a transcendental claim."<sup>51</sup> White hastens to add, however, that "Taylor speaks only of 'transcendental conditions,' being careful to insert scare quotes."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, White continues, even if Taylor maintains that the picture of agency defended by his opponents is that of a monster, "Taylor is nevertheless aware that he has no philosophical means of establishing an absolutely incontestable boundary for us/monsters. Accordingly, he admits that his appeal to conceptual necessity is in reality always open to contest."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

There seems little doubt, then, that the cautious way in which Taylor crafts his arguments about agency put him “squarely within the terrain of weak ontology,”<sup>54</sup> as Taylor is fully aware that his view on human agency does not establish metaphysical truths. As White concludes this point, since Taylor is operating “from within the perspective of engaged, embodied agency,” he cannot at the same time claim “to have discovered a level of metaphysical bedrock.”<sup>55</sup> In White’s view, then, these points testify to the weak-ontological—that is, non-metaphysical—character of Taylor’s philosophical-anthropological and phenomenological views.

White sees a second example of Taylor’s weak-ontological aspiration in the historical narrative laid out in *Sources of the Self*. He first draws the larger background from which Taylor’s narrative must be understood: “One of the characteristics of a felicitous weak ontology is the persuasiveness with which an array of specific concepts of self, other, and world are located within a broad historical narrative.”<sup>56</sup> He then depicts Taylor’s contribution in *Sources of the Self* as a leading example of such a historical narrative by describing it as “one of the grandest portraits of the modern West that has appeared in recent decades.”<sup>57</sup> This portrait, White explains, consists of three basic “ontological constellations”: the “original theistic one,” the “naturalism of disengaged reason,” and the constellation that “emerges out of romanticism.”<sup>58</sup> Without getting into the details, it is a crucial point in White’s analysis to show how Taylor’s narrative “does indeed affirm a certain openness to ontological diversity”<sup>59</sup> to highlight the weak-ontological thrust of Taylor’s view. In this way, White argues that Taylor again takes a non-metaphysical stance in developing his historical narrative as he “guarantees that his ontological insights, whether relating to templates or full constellations, signal their own limits, contain their own sense of contestedness; in short, they offer themselves as ‘weak’ in my sense.”<sup>60</sup>

White’s third example of the weak-ontological nature of Taylor’s position concerns what he calls Taylor’s “aesthetic-expressive theism.”<sup>61</sup> In this regard, White convincingly shows how Taylor’s theism crucially depends on his view that God, as any moral source, is now “inextricably entangled with subjective articulation,” referring to Taylor’s complex “interweaving of the subjective and the transcendent” and his idea that “theology is ‘indexed’

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, note 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

to ‘languages of personal resonance.’”<sup>62</sup> At this point, White’s conclusion that Taylor’s brand of theism “broadly supports the idea of weak ontology” should no longer surprise us.<sup>63</sup>

### 3. A Taylor Left Out of White’s Taylor

White’s interpretation raises a fundamental question: even if there are certain weak-ontological elements in Taylor’s views, does that necessarily mean that he is a weak ontologist through and through? Reflecting on this question, it is clear that White’s approach is far more fruitful than attempts that rest on the destructive logic that, as Ruth Abbey aptly puts it, “one is either a Platonic moral realist or a projectivist.”<sup>64</sup> However, it is doubtful whether White’s reading can accommodate the full scope of Taylor’s ontology. For example, to what extent is Taylor’s claim in his paper “Ethics and Ontology” (which White does not discuss) that we are best advised to *revise* naturalist ontology in favour of moral phenomenology still consonant with the basic weak-ontological assumption that all fundamental conceptualizations are inherently contestable? Make no mistake: Taylor’s point is that his moral phenomenology *rules out* naturalist ontology. How does this full-out attack on naturalist-inspired metaphysics relate to weak ontology’s self-declared non-metaphysical stance and its “fallibility” and “partiality”?<sup>65</sup> In this respect, it is worth noting that Taylor heightens the tension by insisting that we must suffer one of two things: the pain of “resisting the phenomenology” or the pain of “challenging the ontology.”<sup>66</sup> More than anything else, however, this question is *metaphysical*.

There is, moreover, the concern that White’s “ontological sketch” results in a too limited account of Taylor’s arguments about agency. Many commentators point out that his philosophical anthropology and his moral phenomenology insist on *universal*—rather than contestable—features of both selfhood and morality. As a philosophical anthropologist, Taylor defines “those timeless features of human agency that hold across cultures whenever we try to define the historically specific sense of self of a given age.”<sup>67</sup> As a moral philosopher, he delineates structural features of moral experience that exist in “every culture.”<sup>68</sup> As a metaphysical thinker, he argues that moral reactions are best understood as “responses to some reality,” as it lies in their nature to claim “truth, reality, or objective rightness.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” 310, 312.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, “The Moral Topography,” 299.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor, Charles. “Disenchantment-Reenchantment,” in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 297-298.

Furthermore, as Abbey emphasizes, Taylor's doctrine of strong evaluation shows that relativist and subjectivist moral theories are not merely partial but utterly mistaken.<sup>70</sup> For this reason, Taylor does not stop at simply drawing a picture of selfhood in terms of "strong evaluation," that is, "the recognition that certain goals or ends make a claim on us, are incommensurable with our other desires and purposes."<sup>71</sup> Taylor's next step is to argue that "strong evaluation is something inescapable in our conception of the agent and his experience," that strong evaluations are "inseparable from ourselves as agents," and that "shorn of these we would lose the very possibility of being an agent who evaluates."<sup>72</sup>

These points illustrate that, while it is true in general that Taylor urges caution in developing his narrative about the modern self in terms of human universals, he is quite determined when it comes to defending the transcendental necessity of strong evaluation. Far from "prefiguring," Taylor's position is that any conception of human nature that resists strong evaluation is not just incomplete but is just wrong, and cannot but be so after considering his arguments. All this indicates a fairly strong stand (realist, essentialist, or some sort), at least on what human nature and morality consist in, but maybe even on the issue of "the way the world is," to put it in strong ontological terms. However, because Taylor also believes that "what we are as human agents is profoundly interpretation-dependent,"<sup>73</sup> and, moreover, because his arguments steer a course between political theory, philosophical anthropology, ethics, phenomenology, ontology, and metaphysics, it remains to be argued in more detail why Taylor does not fit well into White's picture of weak ontology. In the next section, I will therefore try to capture the *source* of the difficulty by shining a spotlight on White's habit of equating philosophical anthropology with ontology, while also showing how this habit prevents him from recognizing the full scope of Taylor's non-anthropocentric and interwoven modes of argumentation.

#### 4. The Limits of Weak Ontology

At the beginning of his analysis of Taylor's views, White makes a quick point about terminology (albeit only in a footnote):

Taylor sometimes uses the term *philosophical anthropology* to describe his project, rather than *ontology*. Given the traditional connotations of the latter term, this seems appropriate. But Taylor is himself not entirely satisfied with the former term. I think that my notion of weak ontology would be largely appropriate for the kind and level of philosophical reflection he has in mind.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 25-26.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 332.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 33-34.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, "The Moral Topography," 299.

<sup>74</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 43, note 3.

As noted in Section 1, Taylor himself has made it clear in a reflection on White's *Sustaining Affirmation* that he is thinking along the same lines as is White about issues that he labels both as 'philosophical-anthropological' and 'ontological.' However, one major disadvantage of equating ontology with philosophical anthropology is that it reduces ontological inquiry in general and makes invisible Taylor's non-anthropocentric metaphysical view in particular. Moreover, White's holistic approach of clustering philosophical-anthropological, moral-phenomenological, transcendental, descriptive, normative, and theistic claims all under the label of "Taylor's richer ontology" blurs the distinctions between Taylor's different philosophical strategies and, in so doing, obscures the precise nature of their entanglement.

In this respect, the tension between moral experience and naturalist ontology could neither be articulated nor discussed from within White's weak ontology, because it is a deliberate strategy of this approach *not* to make the crucial distinction between ethics and ontology that allows for the meta-perspective from which their relationship can be assessed. White explains his holistic view in terms of his key notion of a "stickier" subject.<sup>75</sup> He generally employs this term to oppose what Taylor has called the "ideal of the disengaged self."<sup>76</sup> White explains the difference as follows: whereas the modern disengaged subject (also the "Teflon" subject) "generates distance from its background (tradition, embodiment) and foreground (external nature, other subjects)," it is essential to the *late* modern sticky subject that it "cannot be divorced from the practical embeddedness of reflection, and thus must be approached through an interpretive-existential mode of thought."<sup>77</sup> It is precisely because of this "stickiness," White explains, that ontological reflection can no longer be seen as an "exclusively cognitive matter, as it was traditionally, and still is for much of analytic philosophy."<sup>78</sup> He elaborates:

Ontological commitments in this sense are thus entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively. ... Ontological reflection thus becomes inextricably entangled with distinct characteristics of human being ... in the form of deep reconceptualizations of human being in relation to its world. More specifically, human being is presented as in some way "stickier" than in prevailing modern conceptualizations.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> As Taylor explains in *Sources*: "This is the ideal of the disengaged self, capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act 'rationally,'" 21.

<sup>77</sup> White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal," 503.

<sup>78</sup> White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal," 504, and *Sustaining Affirmation*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 4-5.

The conception of a stickier subject is an inventive way of making sense of Taylor's tendency to straddle philosophical domains in developing an interwoven type of argument. That is, White has fully grasped Taylor's interwoven strategy by emphasizing the problem that "at this deepest level many familiar analytical categories and operations become blurred or exhibit torsional effects."<sup>80</sup> He explains:

[T]he more I pondered the relation between ethics and ontology, the more they seemed mutually constitutive at this level and the less possible it seemed to accord one or the other clear primacy . . . . It was at this point that the full significance of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* began to dawn on me.<sup>81</sup>

This point is well taken when we consider the problem that having recourse to a more conventional vocabulary does not help to clarify Taylor's interwoven claims but, on the contrary, cuts us off from his "sticky" type of inquiry. White's sticky subject even anticipates Taylor's recent contact theory in *Retrieving Realism*, which argues that our "original" way of being in the world reflects a kind of understanding that generally *resists* distinctions between "explicit, analytical elements," such as those between "subject and object," "fact and value," and "belief and reality."<sup>82</sup>

As these points suggest, White's approach makes a strong case for the claim that differentiating between Taylor's various concerns distorts rather than clarifies his ontology. In my view, however, we must look into the relationships between Taylor's various concerns only *after* having set the boundaries that separate them, and that doing so uncovers a non-anthropocentric metaphysical viewpoint that would otherwise remain invisible. White attacks this approach at its core by insisting on the practical embeddedness of reflection. From his perspective, our current argumentative situation requires not demarcation but an "interpretive-existential" approach that accounts for the ways in which philosophical categories "entangle themselves."<sup>83</sup>

Yet it is questionable whether White's highlighting of stickiness really enables us to explore Taylor's multifaceted ontology in an illuminating way. This brings us to some more fundamental concerns about weak ontology. In the end, two major problems press on White's account. First, it imposes on us a *political* model for ontological reflection, stifling all the others. Second, because of this, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate Taylor's latest question of how to align our ethical-political affirmations with an adequate ontology. This last claim may seem startling, given White's overall objective

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<sup>80</sup> White, "Weak Ontology: Genealogy," 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 94, 103.

<sup>83</sup> White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal," 503, and "Weak Ontology: Genealogy," 14.



of sustaining ontological affirmation in the face of what we might call a ‘post-modern climate.’ Let me flesh this out.

White’s implicit critique of employing familiar analytical distinctions (subject-object, fact-value, belief-reality, etc.) is that this does not fully acknowledge that we live in late modern times. As he says, “the sense of living in *late* modernity implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West.”<sup>84</sup> As we have just seen, “at issue is the assertive, disengaged self” as the incorporation of the “dominant ontological investments of modernity.”<sup>85</sup> For present purposes, this means that the attempt to separate philosophical categories and domains is somewhat dated in the sense that a strict division between subject and object, man and world, philosophical anthropology and metaphysics, ethics and ontology, etc., partakes of the (strong) ontology of the disengaged modern self rather than the (weak) ontology of the stickier late modern subject.

However, it is worth noting that, although the *emphasis* has changed in the passage to late modernity—from a focus on the things ‘in themselves’ to a focus on the human subject—the central question has remained the same: how does the human being relate to his or her world? It is precisely the attempt to explore both the subjective and the objective elements of our human way of being in the world that defines Taylor’s concern for the ontological preconditions of human subjectivity. The problem with White’s analysis, then, is that even if it is true that all philosophical problems relate to the wider (weak-ontological) question of what it is to be human, it is too quick to conclude that *all* ontological questions can be discussed under the labels of ‘human nature,’ ‘philosophical anthropology,’ or ‘weak ontology.’ Yet, as we have seen in the above discussions, this is precisely the objective of White’s approach, namely, to consider “too metaphysical” approaches to ontology to be excessive, originating from a bygone age. This is where the limits of weak ontology come to the fore.

The explicit non-metaphysical thrust of White’s approach re-raises the suspicion (first expressed in Section 1) that equating philosophical anthropology and ontology blocks out Taylor’s most recent question of what we are committed to ontologically by our moral beliefs. That is, if it has become impossible in late modern times to accord either ethics or ontology or philosophical anthropology “clear primacy” because these domains appear as “mutually constitutive” rather than as distinct analytical categories, then how do we account for the *conflict* between moral phenomenology and naturalist ontology?<sup>86</sup> Put differently, if ontological commitments have become entangled with questions of identity and history to such an extent that we can no longer “cleanly separate self and foundation,” then there is no more space left to investigate the metaphysical

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<sup>84</sup> White, “Weak Ontology and Liberal,” 503.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> White, “Weak Ontology: Genealogy,” 14.

reality behind this identity and history either.<sup>87</sup> Confusingly, this is nonetheless one of the central points of White's weak ontology, which after all "demands from us the affirmative gesture of constructing foundations," albeit in a late modern, non-metaphysical fashion.<sup>88</sup>

As the present analysis demonstrates, it is precisely by *differentiating* between various existential realities (anthropological, social, phenomenological, ethical, and ontological) that the tension between moral experience and naturalist ontology becomes accessible. In this respect, what is striking about Taylor's ontology is that it neither deduces ontological givens from the social existence of values nor locates the source of ethics in a "strong" Platonic human-independent reality. White's non-metaphysical perspective, on the other hand, seems to hold that what Taylor identifies as the metaphysical reality behind our strong values does not exist. Here we come up against the boundaries of White's account, for his distinction between strong and weak ontologies leaves room neither for the tension between ethics and ontology in a naturalist climate nor for the way in which Taylor defines his unique ontological position within this climate. That is, whereas White insists that "the cogency of weak ontology is not traceable to a sky hook or metaphysical anchor,"<sup>89</sup> Taylor's concern is precisely the opposite: namely, to trace the metaphysical source that makes best sense of our moral experience. This, I believe, is what Taylor is gesturing at when invoking "the *contrary* ethical and metaphysical passions of the modern age."<sup>90</sup>

For all the interesting parallels between Taylor's interwoven strategy and White's perspective of stickiness, it is clear that the challenges facing the late modern sticky subject cannot be made intelligible without 'un-sticking' the different realities to which this subject belongs. Yet this result—that we first need to *disentangle* our various commitments in order to appreciate the nature of their entanglement—is more troublesome for White's argument than for the present analysis since it is crucial for weak ontology to take these entangled commitments as they are and to hold at bay all metaphysical anchors that could help alleviate them.

Perhaps the best way to move this important issue forward is through the following question: which approach ultimately carries most *explanatory* force, one that insist on the stickiness and multiplicity of our commitments or one that explores their boundaries by *confronting* them with one another? From Taylor's perspective, the central phenomenon to be explained is human agency. The issue, then, is this: does weak ontologizing promote reflective self-understanding of the ways of life that are constituted by our ethical-political views? In other words, can we explain in weak-ontological terms what we

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>88</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal," 508.

<sup>90</sup> Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 26, italics mine.

ourselves are doing as moral and political agents? Put differently, what are we forced to recognize the existence of by the way we understand our own actions and deal with the things and people around us?

### 5. Why Taylor is Not a Weak Ontologist

Difficulties start to emerge for White's weak ontology when we press on this issue of hermeneutic explanation. Although stressing the historical, cultural, and contestable character of weak-ontological commitments might add to the plausibility of entwining ontological reflection with political affirmation, the issue is just how much this explains. Ultimately, White's view is that weak ontologies are "fundamental" conceptualizations despite their contestability because they are "nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life."<sup>91</sup> As he explains, "fundamental conceptualization here thus means acknowledging that gaining access to something universal about human being and world is always also a construction that cannot rid itself of a historical dimension."<sup>92</sup>

At first glance, White here simply follows Taylor's view that we should be wary not to mix up "human universals" and "historical constellations."<sup>93</sup> Yet there is also a decisive difference. What White's explanation of the contestability of weak ontology does not discuss is Taylor's belief that we essentially understand self, other, and world in terms of *strong* evaluations that generally refuse to be treated as contestable. The later Taylor makes this very clear:

Our attributing these meanings makes a stronger claim. It lies in their nature as strong evaluations to claim truth, reality or objective rightness. ... it can fail to occur on some occasions or in some people, but this betokens some limitation, blindness, or insensitivity on their part; in other words, there is something objectively right about this response.<sup>94</sup>

This means that, even if our experiences and beliefs are contestable and radically undermined in their meanings, the background that makes sense of them is not. Taylor explains: "These contrasts point up the fact that underlying strong evaluations there is supposed to be a *truth of the matter*. ... Put simply, our moral reactions suppose that they are responses to some *reality*, and can be criticized for *misapprehension* of this reality."<sup>95</sup> In my reading, this is the metaphysical concern underlying Taylor's more politically sensitive claim that "high standards

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<sup>91</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 112.

<sup>94</sup> Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," 298, 300.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 297, italics mine.

need strong sources.”<sup>96</sup> Put simply, this shows that Taylor’s ontology is not merely concerned with political theory, but also with metaphysics.

This point also explains why Taylor ultimately moves away from his original anthropological perspective in “Ethics and Ontology,” *A Secular Age*, and “Disenchantment-Reenchantment”: because adopting a non-anthropocentric view breaks open the issue of how to *align* our most lucid anthropocentric descriptions—either moral-phenomenological or philosophical-anthropological or weak-ontological—with an adequate metaphysics. It is therefore precisely the move *beyond* a mere weak-ontological perspective that enables Taylor to focus on the metaphysical reality behind social theory.

For the weak ontologist, however, this move is “too metaphysical.” As a result, White’s conception can include neither Taylor’s view that the source of value lies beyond human control nor that his ontology freely crosses the boundaries between strong and weak ontologies in White’s sense. Since he does not elaborate on this, I find it difficult to see what kind of balance White thinks he has struck by identifying Taylor’s fundamental ethical-political orientation, on the one hand, and the recognition of the deeply contestable character of this foundation, on the other.

## 6. Conclusion

Given these points, it may be helpful to realize that White and Taylor ultimately take their ontologies in opposite directions. Taylor’s question is not which viable principles we can derive from ontological inquiry, but which ontology offers the best explanation of our ethical-political commitments. This begs the question of what deserves priority: ethics or ontology? For White, it does not really matter:

[I]t should be clear where I stand in regard to philosophers who claim that either ontology or ethics is *the* proper starting point of philosophical reflection. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, famously critiques Heidegger for making ontology the first philosophy, whereas in reality it should be ethics. My thought is that there simply is no privileged starting place. Ontological figurations will always be rooted in some specific way of conceptually carving up self, other, and world.<sup>97</sup>

Taylor implicitly agrees with this view, since his interwoven mode of thought does not lend itself to any simple prioritizing. At the same time, it is clear that Taylor’s non-anthropocentric ontologizing reaches beyond White’s non-metaphysical political project. Therefore, despite the clear parallels between both ontologies, Taylor ultimately adds an extra question—not the practical one of how we can sustain our policies but the more metaphysically sensitive one of what it is that implicitly informs and directs our moral and political

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<sup>96</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 516.

<sup>97</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 12, note 13.

claims and actions. The burden on weak ontology as a *philosophical* program, then, is that White's perspective would exclude questions that Taylor's meta-analysis opens up. Operating within a political mode of questioning, White would sustain the affirmations we have been given, whereas Taylor, as a metaphysician, investigates what makes possible such affirmations at all.

Insightful and illuminating as it is, White's interpretation centres on only *one* of Taylor's many employments of the concept of ontology: the political one.<sup>98</sup> It should not surprise us, then, that his weak-ontological reading fails to acknowledge the full gamut of the issues to explore in Taylor's ontology, due to the somewhat rigid distinction between strong ontologies that show us "the way the world is" and weak ontologies that are not so "rooted in a crystalline conviction of ultimate cognitive truth."<sup>99</sup> More particularly, White fails to explain how and where the metaphysical issue of non-anthropocentrism enters into Taylor's thought. In this respect, falsely equating philosophical anthropology with ontology is as if a category Taylor needs for his non-anthropocentric urges is being illegitimately credited with a philosophical-anthropological grounding.

Despite these reservations regarding White's approach to Taylor's ontology, I do not deny the overall importance of the weak-ontological approach, either for challenging liberal theories that ignore or suppress ontological reflection or for drawing attention to the cost of such strategies. My restricted aim here has been to highlight the need within White's analysis for a fuller account of the non-anthropocentric elements in Taylor's ontology, and of the place of these elements within Taylor's distinctive interwoven line of argumentation in between philosophical anthropology, political theory, ethics, ontology, and metaphysics. Until he resolves these issues, White's weak-ontological portrait will continue to be in tension with Taylor's metaphysical concerns for the reality underlying our weak conceptualizations.

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<sup>98</sup> Instructive of White's political perspective is that his analysis of Taylor's ontology is launched by a quotation from the paper "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate" (*Sustaining Affirmation*, 42).

<sup>99</sup> White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 6 and "Weak Ontology and Liberal," 506.

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