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Liberalism and the Interpretive Turn: Rival Approaches or Cross-Purposes?

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Abstract: This paper calls attention to the interpretive, and humanist liberal, strand of thinking that is most clearly evident in the development of Charles Taylor's ideas. Recovering it makes it possible to see why the differences between Taylor and Rawls should be seen, not in terms of the erstwhile disputes between liberals and communitarians, but instead as over issues of method, and in particular about the independence or autonomy of political philosophy. Rawls and Taylor exemplify distinct modes of postanalytic liberal theorizing that emerged in the late twentieth century out of two very different responses to challenges within analytic philosophy's discursive beginnings that continue to divide the discipline to this day. Their juxtaposition, therefore, sheds light on how such methodological commitments animate normative prerogatives and generates important resources for thinking about the very powers and limits of political theory.

Introduction

Major movements in philosophy in the early twentieth century created a special context for diverse analytic, and postanalytic, thinkers to reinvent modes of political theorizing in the Anglophone world.[1] To many commentators, the drive

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[1]The literature on the contested history of analytic philosophy has rapidly grown in recent years. See Ray Monk and Anthony Palmer, eds., *Bertrand Russell and the Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996); Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Alan Richardson, *Carnap's Construction of the World: The "Aufbau" and the Emergence of Logical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Beaney, "Conceptions of Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy," *Acta Analytica* 15 (2000): 97–115; Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, eds., *The Story of Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Routledge,

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for analysis and with it the remarkable transitions in how moral and political concerns could legitimately be addressed spelled the "death of political theory."[2] Among several contributing factors, the rise of modernist empiricism in the form of logical positivism and ordinary-language philosophy had the most profound impact, with their twin deflationary effects of emotivism and conventionalism with respect to normative issues.[3] Ever since Isaiah Berlin recorded his worries in this context about the continuing life of political theory, and Peter Laslett famously declared in 1956 that, "for the time being anyway, political philosophy is dead,"[4] a narrative of death and resurrection has come to define Anglo-American political theory's self-image.

Reciting such obituaries serves to preface the celebration of political theory's *re*-birth.[5] And where liberal theory is concerned, John Rawls is routinely credited with single-handedly reviving political theory from its moribund post–World War II state.[6] The liberal tradition, however, before and alongside Rawls, actually includes multiple and overlapping strains of thought that get eclipsed when Rawls's prominence, and too great a focus on the particular form of argumentation he characterizes, are read back

1998); and Juliet Floyd and Sanford Shieh, eds., *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2]Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?," in *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Penguin Books, 1979). Cf. Judith Shklar, *After Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), vii; Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 17.

[3]I do not address in this article the broader impact of the Cold War on the development of twentieth-century political theory. See John Gunnell, "American Political Science, Liberalism, and the Alienation of Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 1 (1988): 71–87; John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011). Mark Bevir has detailed the shared themes and dilemmas comprising "modernist empiricism" in "Histories of Analytic Political Philosophy," *History of European Ideas* 23 (2011): 243–48; and "Political Studies as Narrative and Science, 1880–2000," *Political Studies* 54 (2006): 583–606. For historical analysis, Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[4]Peter Laslett, introduction to *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), viii.

[5]Others such as Quentin Skinner and Sheldon Wolin have also been viewed as saviors. See Robert Adcock and Mark Bevir, "The Remaking of Political Theory," in *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880*, ed. Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, and Shannon Stimson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 208–33.

[6]Recent examples include Richard Arneson, "Justice After Rawls," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. J. Dryzek, B. Honig, and A. Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 45–64; J. Donald Moon, "The Current State of Political Theory: Pluralism and Reconciliation," in *What Is Political Theory?*, ed. S. White and J. Moon (London: Sage, 2004).

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into its history as its main features.[7] The all too common narrative of Rawls as political theory's savior has rendered virtually invisible other notable ways in which political theory underwent "reinvention" in the twentieth century.[8] Furthermore, it has allowed the differences and similarities between Rawls and other prominent liberals to be obscured, and thus their relative strengths and weaknesses to be misdiagnosed.

This paper calls attention to the interpretive, humanist liberal strand of thinking that is most clearly evident in the development of Charles Taylor's ideas.[9] If it strikes some readers as strange to name Taylor a "liberal" at the outset and proceed from this assertion without qualification, then something else needs addressing before the argument can get underway.[10] Calling Taylor

[7]Although it would be possible to point to Taylor's early political engagements at Oxford—his involvement with the New Left, Marxism—as well as his occasional self-descriptions as "social democrat" and "civic republican" as somehow disqualifying him as a proper liberal, Taylor has long expressed unwavering commitment to values we would unquestionably count as liberal: respect for individual autonomy and human rights, individual agency, ethical pluralism, the rule of law, and so on. Calling attention to the way that Taylor represents an interpretive, humanist liberal tradition helps to decenter Rawlsian liberalism on the map of contemporary liberal theory and makes it possible to retrieve the concern with theorizing selfhood and identity, as well as closer lineages to idealist and socialist ideas through T. H. Green and other British Idealists, that was discontinued by Rawls.

[8]Some go further and argue not only that pre-Rawlsian Anglo-American political thought was not as moribund as Rawlsians often assume, but that the moralizing tendency of Rawlsian political philosophy has been out of step with classical liberalism and has been generally unhealthy for the enterprise. See Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chaps. 1–2.

[9]I call attention to this particular tradition, which comprises an important but as yet under-plotted strand of modern liberalism. The term "humanist liberalism" has previously been used in two related contexts I know of. First in 1989 by Susan Moller Okin, whose essay "Humanist Liberalism," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), calls attention to the need for liberal theorists to better understand the pervasive effects of gender roles. In 1994, David Johnston used the term to delineate his preferred alternative to the rights-centered, perfectionist, and political modes of contemporary liberalism—which built on each of their weaknesses in favor of a less "racist," "sexist," and "classist" and less utilitarian and more "value-sensitive" liberal theory in his *The Idea of a Liberal Theory: A Critique and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a marvelous defense of the use of the signifier "humanism," see Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 1–14. While I wish to pay homage to each of these authors, my use refers to the particular characteristics of Taylor's philosophy I draw out as humanist for the kind of interpretivism it emphasizes, precisely in contrast to the legacy of modernist empiricism.

[10]Cornel West, "Hegel, Hermeneutics, Politics: A Reply to Charles Taylor," *Cardozo Law Review* 10, no. 5/6 (1989): 872.

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a liberal requires defense only if one construes *liberal* in the narrowest fashion following the debate sparked by the many responses to *A Theory of Justice* in the seventies and eighties that divided normative political theory between so called "liberals" on one side and "communitarians" on the other. While it is undeniable that Taylor has been a staunch critic of liberal theory's assumptions of atomism and the primacy of individual rights, along with its proceduralist-cum-adversarial mode of justification, his arguments exhibit a far deeper relationship with liberalism than the liberal vs. communitarian distinction can brook.[11]

For a variety of quite contingent reasons, much of the existing literature associates Taylor's emphasis on interpretation with both "communitarianism" (as opposed to "liberalism") and "Continental philosophy" (as opposed to "analytic philosophy"). My claim that Taylor offers an alternative defense of liberalism addresses both of these myopias. Taylor's thinking reflects the approach to political philosophy that was earlier shaped by his Oxford teachers, Isaiah Berlin and Stuart Hampshire, who opposed logical positivism and ordinary-language philosophy, and through whom Oxford philosophy on ethics and politics remained broadly humanistic and interpretive. This strain of thought is worth recovering in its own right, but I contend that examining it also makes it possible to see why the differences between Taylor and Rawls should be seen, not in terms of the disputes between liberals and communitarians, but instead as over issues of method, in particular about the independence or autonomy of political philosophy. The shadow of the liberal-communitarian debate is long, and its tendency to falsely polarize issues continues to support common misreadings of Taylor's philosophy, even among some very prominent scholars.[12]

[11]Ruth Abbey has already pointed out the contested history of contemporary liberalism itself: Abbey, "Is Liberalism Now an Essentially Contested Concept?," *Journal of New Political Science* 27, no. 4 (2005): 461–80. Several commentators, including Abbey, have already shown how in his present form, Taylor is some species of liberal. I build on this insight to show that reading Taylor as a (mere) communitarian is a mistake, but this widespread misreading is a symptom of a larger, deeply pervasive, narrative about Rawls and twentieth-century liberalism in the Anglo-American context. Taylor's views on interpretation and philosophical method have received far less attention in the literature; the purpose of this paper is to advance the pivotal role they have in how contemporary liberal theorizing in the Anglo-American context should be understood in the wake of analysis.

[12]Readings of Taylor that categorize him among the "communitarian" critics of Rawls are legion in the literature. One discussion worth mentioning exhibits a version of this misperception, namely, Kymlicka's *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47–99, esp. 76, 86–89, where he appears at times to conflate Taylor's social thesis with Sandel's "politics of the common good." Ironically, it was this work that demonstrated how liberal and communitarian perspectives need be viewed not as antithetical but as mutually dependent, particularly concerning minority cultural rights. A recent example can be found in Sarah Song's

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Parts I and II show that far from political philosophy's death and Rawlsian revivification, Rawls and Taylor exemplify distinct modes of post-analytic liberal theorizing that emerged in the late twentieth century out of two very different responses to challenges within analytic philosophy's discursive beginnings.[13] Rawls sought to emulate the formalism pursued by modernist empiricists like Ayer, Carnap, and other members of the Vienna Circle. He devised a liberal political theory within a decision-making framework that helped him to minimize the interpretive challenges of articulating liberal values amid diverse cultural conditions.[14] Taylor, on the other hand, took up the critique of modernist empiricism of Berlin and Hampshire, and by also incorporating an essentially interpretive framework from Hegel and the phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, he effectively brought the insights of an "interpretive turn" to bear on the question of how liberal values in politics might be theorized and defended.

Part III explains how Rawls's method and Taylor's critique of methodology reflect profound disagreement on two major issues: (1) whether a proceduralist approach to political philosophy is coherent, or ultimately ends up being inarticulate about its own commitments; and (2) whether proceduralism provides an attractive approach to securing mutual respect in modern pluralistic societies, or the suppression of background assumptions engenders misrecognition, hence injustice. On Taylor's account, political theory is about properly explaining social phenomena. Proper social explanation, moreover, requires a deep hermeneutics to understand what people do for the reasons they do them, which can never be bypassed in order to understand what moral commitments people have, or should have, when deliberating matters of justice or public policy. This aim would seem to place Taylor at cross-purposes with Rawls, rather than qualify him as a genuine rival, since Rawls's primary purpose was never to explain social phenomena. We may thus be tempted to take separate lessons from each and choose between

reading of what Taylor means by culture "as an irreducibly social good," which she takes to be a collectivist version of "strong multiculturalism" compared to Kymlicka's "weak multiculturalism" (Song, *Justice, Gender, and the Politics of Multiculturalism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], esp. 17–22).

[13]It is in Quine's sense of the collapse of the analytic-synthetic distinction that I take both Rawls and Taylor to be *post*-analytic figures (W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *Philosophical Review* 60 [1951]).

[14]Others at Oxford similarly enamored of logical positivism and linguistic analysis continued to work on ethical questions—e.g., H. L. A. Hart on the relationship between law and morality; R. M. Hare on universal prescriptivism; and G. A. Cohen who famously applied analysis to Marxism. Rawls, however, is germane to the liberal context that is the focus of this paper. While Rawls was contemporary with, if not preceded by, Brian Barry, present-day significance puts Rawls at the center of the backdrop in contrast to Taylor.

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them as a matter of personal preference or philosophical style, or given the particular circumstances of the issue at hand.

I contend, however, in Part IV, that what Taylor shows us is that the choice between the Rawlsian method and the Taylorian critique of methodology is not a trivial one between two independently viable modes of liberal theorizing—between viewing normative justification as a separate activity with separate goals from that of social explanation or viewing them as interdependent. Rawls and Taylor do not merely operate at different levels. Rather, the upshot of Taylor's arguments about the necessary connection between what moral commitments people have and the particular background conditions against which they shape and hold their identity is that the latter cannot effectively be set aside. His argument for why interpretation must always be connected to justification and vice versa is that justification only ever occurs interpretively, as explanation of the already immanent and lived-through understandings that make up shared practices. This feature of Taylor's approach, the capacity to give an account of Rawls's method, but not vice versa, appears to constitute an asymmetrical advantage that is unmatched by Rawls.

The paper concludes by further assessing how Taylor's approach may offer important lessons for political theorists concerned with ethical pluralism, since, contrary to Rawls, Taylor remains far more open to the idea that normative theory and ethics overlaps with social theories, and therefore with the philosophy of social sciences. The interdependent relationship that Taylor posits between social theories and the practices they bear on, however, means that even the practice of normative theory is susceptible to change given the language of explanation we employ. If we agree that our theories not only represent the objects they are about, as natural-science theories aim to do, but can also shape, importantly, the practices they bear on, then Taylor effectively challenges us to reject the quietist conclusion about methodology, "to each his own." In other words, how we go about interpreting our practices will bear directly upon the condition we seek to explain, and thereby determine what forms of liberal theorizing remain viable going forward. Needless to say, further debate will be required to determine who offers a more practically useful approach to justification in any given instance. My reading of the alternative approach found in Taylor shows why that is not a choice to be taken lightly; and this paper aims to provide much needed fodder for this further debate.

I. The Idea of a Liberal Theory in the Twentieth Century

The separate careers of these two contemporaries are marked by the way each grapples with the paramount concern at the heart of modern liberal theory, namely, ethical pluralism and the prospects for democratic solidarity. Too great an emphasis on their opposed reactions to modernist empiricism,

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however, makes it all too easy to advance, as many have, facile characterizations that pit the *abstract* and *ahistorical liberalism* of Rawls against Taylor's *historicist* and *particularist communitarianism*. Such labels, however, obscure the many deep normative commitments that they share, including the value of civic friendship and mutual recognition among free and equal persons, the importance of fair schemes of cooperation, and the need to secure social goods through shared institutions, as well as the aim to draw normative commitments from society's constitutive understandings, and of advancing theories about such commitments as "best" accounts. Place too much emphasis on their shared normative concerns, however, and we risk running together what are essentially divergent conceptions of the craft of political philosophy—its preconditions, its role in social life and justification, and what, if anything, the burdens of interpretation demand.

Their divergence on the method of political philosophy draws support from two quite different theories of meaning that emerged at a pivotal moment in Oxford philosophy in the 1950s. Rawls was a Fulbright fellow at Christ Church in 1952–1953; and Taylor was a reader in PPE from 1952 to1955 and remained as fellow of All Souls until 1961 when he finished his doctorate.[15] Their crossing denotes two very different responses to how political philosophy might be deployed in the wake of analysis, and marks a significant point of departure for what came to be two divergent forms of late-twentieth-century liberal theorizing.[16]

During his graduate years at Princeton, Rawls had already begun to formulate a distinctively modernist project that set out to justify moral judgments in a manner that parallels scientific knowledge, and likened ethical reasoning to rules of logic and language, which are neither subjective nor descriptions of fact.[17] The year at Oxford put Rawls in close company with thinkers who helped him to develop the idea of justifying substantive moral principles by reference to an appropriately formulated deliberative procedure.[18] In formulating his criteria for agreement on moral judgments between reasonable

[15]Nicholas Smith details the impact of the developments of Oxford philosophy on Taylor as a student and in turn how Taylor shaped those developments in his *Charles Taylor: Meanings, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

[16]How one draws this division will depend to some degree on one's purposes. For example, Charles Blattberg emphasizes a version of this opposition that distinguishes between "monists" like Rawls and Dworkin, who fail to "take politics seriously enough," and pluralists like Berlin and Hampshire, who view incommensurable values as irreconcilable and so take politics as a matter of tragic compromises (Charles Blattberg, "Taking Politics Seriously—But Not Too Seriously," available at http://ssrn.com/abstract=1723387).

[17]Andrius Galisanka and Mark Bevir, "John Rawls in Historical Context," *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 4 (2012): 701–25.

[18]Pogge's account details how the developments in British and Oxford philosophy—including J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, H. L. A. Hart, Peter Strawson, H. Paul Grice, and

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persons under conditions of disagreement, Rawls apparently drew on many sources, including Wittgenstein's naturalism and his analogy of language to games, as well as Quine's holism in the justification of ethical principles; but his debt to Carnap is unmistakable.

Rawls was impressed with the approach to meaning that Rudolf Carnap and members of the Vienna Circle employed, and he saw them as worth emulating.[19] He adopted Carnap's conviction that from an adequate theory consisting of a formal set of axioms and principles we can adequately explain, predict, and deduce the very ethical judgments we make. Rawls sought to identify formal principles that would explain appearances, and to discover a logical syntax of moral judgments, clearly evident in his concepts of "reasonable man," his views on "considered judgments," and most famously his arguments from "the original position," including the feature of "the veil of ignorance." Pogge writes, "As with later versions of the original position, Rawls was hoping that he could derive substantive results from an exact and elaborately justified specification of a hypothetical situation—that is, without having to implement a procedure with actual participants."[20] By the 1970s, Rawls's liberal philosophical project effectively elevated a form of moral theorizing that buys into the notion of the autonomy of ethics to the center of Anglo-American political theory. With force, Rawls argued that moral theory and the study of structures as they relate to our moral sensibilities and natural attitudes are all independent of theories of meaning, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind.[21] He sought to detach the definition of social justice from the diverse moral aspirations and pursuits of individuals within society.

Taylor's intellectual roots at Oxford reveal, instead, the continuation of an alternative interpretive and humanist liberal strain of thinking that was largely shaped by Berlin and Hampshire against logical positivism and ordinary-language philosophy, against the arguments of Carnap, Ayer, and Austin and the rise of modernist empiricism.[22] Although Berlin was initially

R. M. Hare—had a great impact on Rawls's thinking (Thomas Pogge, *John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]).

[19]Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (London: Kegan Paul, 1937).

[20]Thomas Pogge, *John Rawls*, 17.

[21]Rawls repeats his view of the independence of moral theory in several places, asserting that normative considerations are autonomous and need not be adjudicated by considerations about human nature or facts about our social condition: Rawls, "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 60, no. 2 (1951): 177–97; "The Independence of Moral Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 48 (1974).

[22]Elsewhere, I have expounded its main themes, namely, an antinaturalist, vitalist philosophy of human sciences, an antirelativist, antiskeptical stance on the importance of human values, and a deep concern with the political implications of the irreducible

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drawn to the logical positivists' suspicion of metaphysical claims and preoccupation with the nature and authority of knowledge, he expressed frustration with the account of meaning they propounded. In his 1939 essay "Verification," Berlin fundamentally took issue with the philosophical endeavor to reduce all explanation to a privileged category of basic propositions.[23] Later writings continue to show his deep resistance to the operational idea of positivism, and his view that the principle of verification was tantamount to attempting to define what philosophy could legitimately aim to say, which had the defective consequence of turning any potential philosophical disagreement into a mere procedural problem.[24] To regard philosophy in purely operationalist terms akin to scientific theory is to leave no room for historical imagination or for insight.

For Berlin, the logical-positivist assumption that the meaning of our statements about reality can be given by our procedures for finding it out betrayed a psychological need for certainty that fuels a reductivist drive he referred to as the "Ionian Fallacy," or, "the erroneous assumption that everything is made out of, or can be reduced to, or understood in terms of one and the same substance or type."[25] He insisted on the model of *verstehen* over *wissenschaften* because he viewed the concepts and categories of human experience as requiring a broader range of tasks than logical positivism could ever allow.[26] In addition to Berlin's critique of scientism and insistence on an inside view when it comes to historical understanding, Taylor was clearly impressed by Berlin's preoccupation with the importance of moral evaluation in politics. Taylor was also drawn to Hampshire's arguments for why not everything can or should be reduced to a single model, theory, standard, or ideal. Like Berlin, Hampshire opposed the way the new empiricist wave in the

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plurality of such values in human life. See Naomi Choi, "The Post-Analytic Roots of Humanist Liberalism," *History of European Ideas* 37, no. 3 (2011): 280–92.

[23]Isaiah Berlin, "Verification," in *Concepts and Categories*.

[24]He writes, "disagreement can arise only about the adequacy of this or that suggested analysis of how material object sentences are to be 'reduced' (without residue) to sentences describing both what the observer does, or did, or will observe, as well as what he would, or would have, might or might have, observed under appropriate conditions" (Berlin, "Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements," *Mind* 59, no. 235 [1950]: 289–312).

[25]See the essay that is widely thought to be Berlin's final contribution to the specific field of analytic philosophy, "Logical Translation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 50 (1949–50).

[26]Isaiah Berlin, "The Concept of Scientific History," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 34. The broader view of philosophy that Berlin espoused can be found distilled in two essays that appeared in the early 1960s, "The Purpose of Philosophy," published in the *Sunday Times*, 4 November 1962, and "Does Political Theory Still Exist?"

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philosophy of mind, redolent of Hume, reduced human experience to a succession of impressions and ideas, which rendered persons passive observers instead of self-willed, space-occupying experimenting agents in the social world.[27] Against logical positivists and sense-datum philosophers, Hampshire argued for the primacy of intentionality that is unified in mind and body in our conceptual scheme.[28] He insisted on distinguishing between human actions and mere events, on the basis of his theory of freedom and the fundamental difference he saw between the objects of decision and prediction.[29]

Thus, even before Taylor completed his doctoral dissertation at Oxford in 1961, a critique of naturalism in the human sciences in general and behaviorism in particular, it was his supervisor, Hampshire, who had already expounded a strong antinaturalist rejection of behaviorist analyses of psychological concepts.[30] Hampshire's emphasis on the psychoanalytical account of dispositions is just one particular application of his view (similar to Berlin's) of a thick conception of personal agency: human activities must be understood historically, not mechanistically. These competing reactions to modernist empiricism—the initiations of it by Carnap and Ayer and the objections to it by Berlin and Hampshire—constitute an important discursive backdrop against which Rawls and Taylor came to espouse such different philosophies of the project of liberal theory and the manner in which each crafted his arguments.

Taylor starts with Aristotle's view that humans are social creatures who cannot realize their full potential outside society, but the neo-Hegelian account of reason he develops at Oxford is so thoroughly historicized and processural that he joins the idea of a multiplicity of goods that need to be combined in a human life with an incommensurably pluralist understanding of goods in the modern world. Rawls's method of justifying abstract principles starts with the Kantian framework of a hypothetical choice-situation among reasonable men but displays a postanalytic reliance on the analogy

[27]He argued that our concept of a voluntary, intentional agent is embedded in a network of concepts of space, time, material objects, motion, the perceiving agent, and its perceptual faculties. So tightly woven are these concepts, he contended, that the idea of an observer who is not also an active agent, of a thinker who is not also an actor, is precluded as incoherent (Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* [New York: Viking, 1960]).

[28]Stuart Hampshire , "Self-Knowledge and the Will," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 7, no. 25 (1953): 230–45; cf. "On Referring and Intending," *Philosophical Review* 65 (1956): 1–13.

[29]Stuart Hampshire with H. L. A. Hart, "Decision, Intention and Certainty," *Mind* 67 (1958): 1–12.

[30]Taylor's 1961 DPhil thesis, "Explanation by Purpose and Modern Psychological Theory," supervised by Berlin, is housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. It was eventually published as *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

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between scientific and ethical reasoning by attributing the objectivity of scientific beliefs to ethical ones.[31] Rawls echoed the logical positivists, by way of the American pragmatist tradition, when he explicitly stated the need to separate political philosophy from any metaphysical system.[32] While his claim fell short of the logical-positivist conclusion that metaphysical systems are without purpose or meaning and so ultimately reduce to nonsense, Rawls nonetheless believed that such comprehensive or metaphysical views are wholly irrelevant for the structure and content of a political conception of justice, since they underdetermine substantive positions in ethics and political philosophy.

II. A Liberal Theory against the Autonomy of Ethics

A Theory of Justice, therefore, represents a momentous attempt by a political philosophy to obviate the need for explicit debate over different conceptions of the good that any rational individual might pursue; that is to say, the attempt to establish "the priority of the right over the good."[33] For Rawls, the justification of principles of justice can and should proceed without explicit reference to particular conceptions of what makes a good life, and focus instead on what rational and reasonable individuals in a hypothetical situation of equality might agree to.[34] This method of justification relies on concepts that are meant to reduce, if not eliminate, the lack of fixity in our intuitions and our interpretations thereof, with concepts such as a "thin conception of the good," and the idea of "primary goods," which any rational man is presumed to want, whatever else he wants. Like the most notable social-contract theorists before him, Rawls reformulated the grounds of justification in politics in terms of agreement, consent, and choice, whereby the question of what we ought rationally to will for ourselves is answered by

[31]See *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 21, where Rawls views philosophy as the attempt "to render coherent" our considered moral judgments.

[32]Such is his view for any of the standard meanings of the term "metaphysics" (Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 [Summer 1985]: 223–51).

[33]*Theory of Justice*, Part One; Rawls, "The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (1988): 251–76; Richard Arneson, "The Priority of the Right over the Good Rides Again," *Ethics* 108, no. 1 (1997): 169–96; Samuel Freeman, "Utilitarianism, Deontology, and the Priority of the Right," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 23, no. 4 (1994): 313–49.

[34]Rawls's concern with procedural justification can be seen from his earliest formulations in "Justice as Fairness," *Philosophical Review* 67, no. 2 (1958): 164–94; "The Sense of Justice," *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 3 (1963): 281–305; "Fairness to Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 84, no. 4 (1975): 536–54.

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reflecting on an imagined choice between fixed hypothetical alternatives.[35] The advantage of such a social-contract approach to justification over classical perfectionist or modern utilitarian versions of common-good approaches is the degree to which the former makes it possible in politics to avoid endlessly contestable claims about the good life, human flourishing, or what people's *real* interests may be. Instead, Rawls focuses on the more modest and tractable judgments about what rational agents would voluntarily agree to under specific conditions.

On Rawls's account, the impossibility of reaching consensus about the good is not, by itself, a reason we should eschew neutrality; to the contrary, if consensus about conceptions of the good were possible, neutrality would not be necessary. What clearly animates Rawls is his moral commitment to the importance of treating persons as free and equal citizens for the sake of mutual recognition across ethical difference.[36] Consensus about a conception of justice, for Rawls, embodies neutrality simpliciter; and his method is about constraining the satisfaction of certain conceptions of the good by giving them no weight at all, because he views such preferences to be contrary to justice. For Taylor, agreement about justice is impossible precisely because we can never remain entirely neutral about the good, as human reality is so deeply structured by the meanings it bears for the subjects involved. Thus, while for Rawls the only legitimate standpoint for judging the basic structure is one that is neutral between competing conceptions of the good, for Taylor it is inappropriate, or at best incomplete, to think about principles of justice in a manner that aspires to be detached from some conception of the good that supports it.

Taylor wants to resurrect the premodern idiom of explicitly addressing the question of what is good for human beings, which in politics amounts to explicit inquiry about the common good, as something inherently social and immanent, and therefore historically contingent. That citizens are unlikely to reach consensus about what is good for humans, let alone what the common good should be in matters of politics, is precisely why, for Taylor, theories of justice need to be about investigating and grasping the meanings that social practices embody for the particular participants, which are likely to be diverse and so will need to be mediated through greater dialogue, open, and more inclusive, public discourse. Taylor shares Rawls's (and indeed Berlin's) commitment to value pluralism and is explicit about the fact that

[35]Rawls displaces the metaphysics in Kant's doctrine of human dignity with a combination of a Lockean contract and a Humean conception of "rough equality" as the basis for cooperation. See Jean Hampton, "Contracts and Choices: Does Rawls Have a Social Contract Theory?," *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 6 (1980): 315–38.

[36]Kymlicka offers a useful narrative of the specifically American historical context of the moral commitments that motivated Rawls's thinking about justice (Kymlicka, "The Americanization of Political Philosophy in Canada," *Oxford Literary Review* 28, no. 1 [2008]: 79–89).

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modern societies acknowledge such deep diversity among their citizens that consensus about what the common good should be is unlikely to be ever attainable. Yet he believes that debates about justice will be more fruitful, not if they are divorced from, but rather when they are moved into this register.[37]

Of course, Rawls never opposed theories that try to investigate different conceptions of the good, nor those that aim to promote greater dialogue between citizens about shared conceptions of the good. His claim is simply that we ought not use assessments of the relative merits of different comprehensive doctrines when making decisions about the basic structure of society. He writes that the state should be neutral, "not in the sense that there is an agreed public measure of intrinsic value or satisfaction with respect to which all these conceptions come out equal, but in the sense that they are not evaluated at all from a social standpoint."[38] This strategy of outlining the choice of principles from the point of view of rational and reasonable persons with pre-formed interests in "primary goods" elicited immediate communitarian responses about the "encumbered self" and the importance of social ties for identity.[39]

Countless scholars have made careers out of reading Rawls, exploring the nuances of his thought, and applying his principles to all manner of questions; and it is not the goal of this paper to add a coda to the long line of those. But there is a narrative about Rawlsianism after Rawls that makes it possible to lose sight of his motivations to construct the edifice for distributive justice in the first place, making what was once plain to see now worth repeating. From the start, Rawls was deeply concerned with mutual recognition and solidarity. This can be seen in his understanding of self-respect to be something that is dependent upon respect from others. While he understood self-respect as something that can be obtained, to some extent, through family, friends, and voluntary associations in civil society, he was also quite concerned with the issue of the relations between citizens more generally. Self-respect as a citizen depends, for Rawls, on neutrality, that is to say, on not ranking justice-compatible conceptions of the good for public purposes. And he takes the self-respect of citizens to depend on mutual recognition such that we are not willing to make use of morally arbitrary luck to claim a greater share of what we cooperatively make possible together. When the difference principle is satisfied, inequalities benefit everyone in a certain sense, and therefore everyone can feel that their fellow citizens affirm the importance of their well-being.

[37]Charles Taylor, "The Nature and Scope of Distributive Justice," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 289–317.

[38]John Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 172; cf. *Theory of Justice*, 91 and 396.

[39]Particularly following Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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The reason why distributive justice matters so much to Rawls—why it is so important that inequalities of income and wealth raise the lowest social position, and why, even if everyone does pass or has a real opportunity to pass some threshold of sufficiency, we should bother to care that some have more than others—has to do with Rawls's concern with the recognition and solidarity between citizens that obtain when we see our social institutions as being selected according to the principle of raising the position of the worst off.[40] Rawls clearly believed in the deeper purpose of the goods that a more just distribution is necessary for securing.

Both Rawls and Taylor take mutual recognition and solidarity amid diversity to be of paramount importance for a liberal theory. Yet their divergent views on modernist empiricism and thus their very different approaches to meaning and the craft of political theory make it easy to lose sight of these underlying moral commitments they share. What Rawls takes to be irrelevant to the goal of promoting mutual recognition when it comes to reforming the major institutions that make up the basic structure of society, Taylor takes to be central to it. For this reason, their shared moral commitments point their theories in opposite directions, but not in the ways this has usually been understood in the aftermath of the liberalism vs. communitarianism debate.

Taylor's writings hit their target in Rawls in a much more fundamental way than the latter's usual liberal and communitarian critics did, as Taylor's social thesis targeted both communitarians who would attack liberals for advancing individualist claims while neglecting the importance of communal requirements and bonds, and liberals who would vilify communitarians for permitting collective matters and interests to override the inviolable rights and freedoms of individuals. Many communitarian critics failed to appreciate how Rawls's thin theory of the good was never intended as a theory of human nature as such, nor as a claim about the ontological priority of the individual over the group.[41]

Rawls's insistence on neutrality never involved the daft notion that a social background to individual preferences does not exist. Rather, Rawls's "person" is a political conception, intended as the only appropriate conception for the limited purpose of deciding on principles of justice for the basic structure of society.[42] What is striking is how the respective accounts of justice in Rawls and Taylor imply dramatically different conceptions of the self, which, in turn, provide a point of comparison to assess their relative merits. For Rawls, the central concern is primarily with how members of a polity ought to make decisions, given the multiple sources and wide

[40]Robert Alejandro, "Rawls's Communitarianism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (1993): 75–100; Sibyl Schwarzenbach, "Rawls, Hegel, and Communitarianism," *Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (1991): 539–71.

[41]S. Mulhall and A. Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

[42]Rawls clarifies this point in "Justice as Fairness," 223–51.

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expression of deep disagreement. That is to say, Rawls's main concern is with how we should design, evaluate, and reform common social and political institutions.[43] The relevant (and the only appropriate) conception of the person, then, is as free and equal, as possessing key moral powers such as the capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good, which persons should be equally free to form and revise. Rawls admits that his conception of the person is normative; he insists that it is not ontological, but applicable to the political sphere alone.

Taylor presents a very different conception of person, which he argues is essential, and thus necessary for a political theory, ultimately challenging Rawls's notion that a narrowly construed conception of personhood for political purposes can fit the bill. Taylor lists several features of human beings without which, despite how damaged they may be in any particular life, a life could not be judged to be human: the possession of a sense of self, a notion of the future and the past, the ability to hold values, adopt life plans, and make choices.[44] Unlike other living creatures found in nature, these qualities make human beings a distinctive subclass of agents who, because of their own view of things, can respond and be addressed. Together these constitute the essentially human feature of strong evaluation, the quintessential aspect of personhood that separates human beings from inanimate objects and mere animals and, what is more, makes human agency, unlike other forms of agency, essentially moral.[45]

When Taylor first invoked the term "strong evaluation" in 1977 he referred to the capacity that human agents possess to form desires about our desires, that is, the ability to value the desires we have differently, to make qualitative distinctions among them.[46] The strong evaluator experiences the world through qualitative characterizations of her desires as to their worth, as

[43]Ibid. Rawls repeats this position in several papers: "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," and "The Priority of the Right and Ideas of the Good," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 388–414, 421–48, and 449–72, respectively.

[44]Charles Taylor, "The Concept of a Person," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 97.

[45]Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3: "To give a good first approximation of what this ["modern identity"] means would be to say that it involves tracing various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self. But pursuing this investigation soon shows that you can't get very clear about this without some further understanding of how our pictures of the good have evolved. Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes."

[46]Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, chap. 1. For basic outline of Taylor's concept of strong evaluation as an essential aspect of selfhood, see Nicholas Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity*, 87–121. See also Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 55–100.

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higher or lower, noble or base, as integrative or fragmented. Her interpretations, moreover, speak to how she sees herself vis-à-vis others. Thus, to characterize desires in strong evaluation is to speak of them in terms of the kinds of quality of life they express and sustain, which are beliefs and desires that can only be gained interpretively against a background of understandings that are socially shared. As an ontological holist, Taylor long emphasized the social preconditions of individual actions, in his focus on the shared underpinnings of language, meanings, and culture. Taylor's conception of personhood as strong evaluation makes interpretation fundamental to identity, and he advances a salient point about the *explanatory* importance of intersubjectivity—as conditions for social life, for individual identity, and for the affirmation of any good.

Taylor understood that Rawls never denied that the free individual is only possible within a culture of freedom, and has explicitly addressed the dependence of individuals on sociocultural background structures and community.[47] What Taylor rejects is the possibility of narrowly fixing what counts for personhood so as to establish an ideal standpoint to justify principles for regulating immanent historical, social, and cultural practices. He is also troubled by Rawls's weaker notion of neutrality as a kind of democracy in the assessment of each other's preferences, assuming these are compatible with justice. Taylor's methodological commitments regarding the indispensability of interpretation directly challenge both Rawls's aim of prioritizing the right over the good and the requirement of value neutrality that that entails.[48]

III. Proceduralism, Neutrality, and the Conditions of their Possibility

Rawls's claim that moral theory retains a certain "independence" from further questions of metaphysics, ontology, or semantics deeply imbues all of his ideas about the task of political philosophy including its method and justification. For Taylor, judgment, evaluation, and justification are so inextricably bound up with the good, conceptions of which are only formed through the interplay of interpretation and articulation, and the making of one's identity, that such conceptions are inseparable from the obligations we recognize, advocate, and codify in our institutions. Pursuing a normative ideal of distributive justice by remaining neutral between particular conceptions of the

[47]Rawls's theory always had ontological assumptions that are social; see especially Part Three of *Theory of Justice*.

[48]Cf. Kymlicka's critiques of Rawls's use of the phrase "the priority of the right" to affirm both neutrality over perfectionism and deontology over teleology: Kymlicka, "Rawls on Teleology and Deontology," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17 (1988): 173–90; "Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 886n6.

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good life not only blinds us to the background cultural meanings that underlie and support valuing (and in so doing, ignores strong evaluation as an essential feature of human agency); it also undermines their very sources and conditions for existence. According to Taylor, to view the deeper issues of human nature and our social condition as irrelevant to the normative discourse of justification is to fail to see how the endorsement of any particular good or a right always involves affirming their worth, usually in reference to some essential capacity for human agency that is interpretively, i.e., socially, derived. So, for instance, he thinks there is a whole Western civilization that makes possible the contemporary Rawlsian viewpoint, a viewpoint that, rather than return recognition and support for that civilization and culture, renders them invisible.

To many, Taylor's arguments about strong evaluation and the historical-cum-social conditions of meaning seemed to place him among the usual communitarian critics who rejected the atomistic underpinnings of liberal individualism. Yet, as much as Taylor insisted on selves as always interpretively situated in meaningful social, historical, and cultural contexts, he has always maintained that one's position on the ontological level need not *determine* one's position on the level of advocacy, even though it informs, supports, or provides context for the latter. While Taylor's social thesis advanced a strong ontological claim of a socially embedded, holist understanding of agency and selfhood—on the basis of which he rebukes theories that facilely advance the primacy of individual rights and the priority of the right over the good—he is no more in blanket support of the collectivist idea that we ought to privilege community life and collective goods over individual subjects, on what moral stand or public policy one ought to adopt.[49] His aim, rather, was to show how the affirmation of any good, even individual rights, always points beyond itself to social relations that make it possible for it to be affirmed as a good in the first place.[50]

Taylor's challenge to Rawls is that by remaining silent on its own sources and background assumptions, such procedural attempts to justify substantive moral principles are not only unable to narrate their own appeal, but are also liable to misconstrue the very individual goods in question, and effectively leave out or misunderstand other goods that are intersubjective in nature, such as duties, responsibilities, or allegiances. On this score, even Rawls's numerous mentions of "the social bases of self-respect," which he

[49]Taylor argues that a holist ontology, which can be either individualist or collectivist on advocacy issues, can underpin liberal values and practices. According to Taylor, Humboldt is holist on the ontological question but individualist in advocacy, and, not surprisingly, this is the Humboldt that Taylor finds very attractive. See Charles Taylor, "Cross Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 185.

[50]Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, 187–210.

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refers to as "perhaps the most important social primary good,"[51] appears to suffer a kind of distortion by his methodological framework. While the difference principle was meant to allocate primary goods unconditionally, the problem remains with Rawls's basic conception of self-respect as a social primary good that is subject to distribution.[52] The relationship between this primary good and the others, for instance, is unclear and Rawls never explains how exactly this particular primary good is to be distributed by his two principles.

To answer Taylor's objection, close readers of Rawls would quickly point out that from the very start, Rawls offered the idea of reflective equilibrium as exactly the kind of mechanism that a postfoundational understanding of reason would seem to require for a theory of justice, however ideal. Reflective equilibrium clearly constitutes an important interpretive moment in the theory, as Rawls clearly intended the best account of justice to be one that allows for some mediation and adjustment between general principles and practical judgments. Nevertheless, reflective equilibrium is but one feature in the machinery, one piece of an overarching system, which Rawls built with the structure of a formal theory that readers could adhere to as they fix and fortify their arguments against possible objections. In contrast, Taylor calls for better explaining the judgments that in part define his readers, which is simultaneously to make them open to interpretation and therefore subject to change.

As early as 1976, in an essay that was not published until 1985, referencing Rawls, Taylor wrote, "to try to make a society more distributively just is to try to make it conform more to the constitutive understandings shared in its membership. To try to make a society absolutely just, or bring it closer to absolute justice, or some other good, may well be to subvert and destroy the constitutive understandings."[53] For many of Rawls's critics, not least of them Taylor, no single unique model of just distribution can suffice to answer the complexity of different goods needing to be distributed in any actual society, within groups of different kinds and sizes, not to mention the many contemporary demands for justice that reach beyond the state to international society.[54]

We might be tempted to say that Taylor was simply repeating Walzer's idea that reflections on justice need to start within a particular framework of a specific society. Indeed, Taylor endorsed Walzer's emphasis on the importance of understanding plural values in terms of how subjects within particular

[51] *Theory of Justice*, 440

[52] Although in *Political Liberalism* (181n9) Rawls appears to hint at modifications that would make benefits conditional.

[53] Taylor, "Nature and Scope of Distributive Justice," 302.

[54] Taylor writes that a modern society "can be judged by independent, *mutually irreducible* principles of distributive justice" ("Nature and Scope of Distributive Justice," 312; my emphasis).

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frameworks articulate and live by them. What is distinctive about Taylor's alternative, however, is the way in which his arguments shift the focus of normative justification away from the burdens of transcendental moral argument, out of the domain of moral philosophy, and closer to the philosophy of social sciences where the chief aim of inquiry is proper social explanation. Taylor himself has written on transcendental arguments, which proceed from a given reality to the conditions of its possibility, and his divergence from Rawls lies in his particular conception of interpretation, which makes articulation partly constitutive of meaning, in contradistinction to Rawls's, which treats conceptions of the good as ready to hand.

What justice requires, for Taylor, cannot be known without first grasping the qualitative discriminations that citizens of a polity make to have a sense of what their perceptions of the good are. Grasping what standards are authoritative in a given polity requires interpreting the shared qualitative distinctions that are recognized in that society and properly articulating the multiplicity of goods and values that underlie people's ethical choices, leanings, and intuitions.[55] Since strong evaluators interpret themselves against the backdrop of how they understand others and how others understand them, self-interpretations are constituted by the articulations agents come to accept of themselves. Therefore, unless it is already interpreted as part of the cultural norms and practices that give such reasons currency and moral weight, no general, philosophically abstract reason can be obligation conferring.

Built into Taylor's entire outlook is a conception of the purpose of political theory, as with all of the human sciences, to employ hermeneutics to offer "best" accounts of our practices. The foremost task of political theory is to make sense of the virtue terms that are applied to social and individual visions of the good, which are embedded in the kinds of social interchange and common institutions and purposes that exist specifically in the society where the term is current, that is, ideas about how things can go well or badly between people in the specific context where it makes sense to speak of that value. Where there is articulacy, moreover, there will be a plurality of visions, and what gets interpreted is always malleable by the interpretation and so inherently subject to change. Since articulation is, in part, our interpretive attempt at formulating the experiences we have and our relationship to those experiences so formulated, it makes its "object" something different from what it was before.[56]

Like Taylor, Rawls also sees the aim of political theory to offer a kind of "best" account, but the two have fundamentally different ideas of what constitutes *bestness*. While what makes Rawls's account of justice "procedural" shifts slightly from his early to his later works, Rawls consistently sought to recapture the systematic, reason-based aims of modern political philosophy, albeit with a deflated

[55]Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 77

[56]Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," 38.

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account of reason.[57] His chief aim in his initial statement was to develop an ideal concept of justice, an archetypical model, against which alternative conceptions and actual societies might be measured and evaluated. *A Theory of Justice* clearly hinges on procedural justification: on the idea that agreement on ordering principles for a just society was possible through the architecture of the original position (complete with its conception of personhood, rationality, and reasonableness requirements). While the later Rawls is widely thought to address many of the criticisms his earlier work generated, in that revisions of justice as fairness pay greater attention to the various conditions for human dignity and are explicit about its own historical location in the context of twentieth-century liberal democratic practices, *Political Liberalism* nevertheless expands on its procedural ambitions.[58] Justice as fairness is later presented as a purely political doctrine (not a comprehensive liberalism), which makes it applicable to a wide variety of worldviews and moral positions, but the revised theory further amplifies the idea of the priority of the right over the good in its aims to specify, as Donald Moon has pointed out, "a procedure to determine the principles of justice that all members of a society can find acceptable, in spite of subscribing to different comprehensive moral and philosophical views."[59]

Taylor's reaction against empiricism in its numerous guises finds its target in Rawls's method from his early through his later works—against, respectively, the idea of an a priori moral standpoint, and the requirement to be democratic between values before and without examination of the cultural meanings behind them, respectively. The later Rawls and Taylor continue to differ markedly on what conditions are required for securing mutual recognition and democratic solidarity. Rawls thinks recognition and solidarity can be gained through the forging of a public status, based on core ideas of free and equal citizenship. In contrast, Taylor thinks they always require a deeper mutual understanding of the (diverse) sources of one another's identities. Not unlike Stuart Hampshire's assessment of the achievement of Rawls's later works,[60] Taylor is doubtful that political liberalism, supposedly

[57]Todd Hedrick, *Rawls and Habermas: Reason, Pluralism, and the Claims of Political Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Paul Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Robert S.Taylor, *Reconstructing Rawls: The Kantian Foundations of Justice as Fairness* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

[58]Samuel Scheffler writes, "Rawls's work as he now presents it is addressed to modern democratic societies at a certain historical moment. His political liberalism seeks to establish a liberal conception of justice on the basis of ideas that are implicit in the public political culture of such societies" (Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 146).

[59]J. Donald Moon, "Current State of Political Theory," 20.

[60]Stuart Hampshire, "Liberalism: The New Twist," review of *Political Liberalism* by John Rawls, *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1993.

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not itself a comprehensive morality, can manage to avoid direct conflict with many comprehensive moralities that are likely to flourish in a modern democracy. For instance, Taylor's interpretive basis for the view that politics should incorporate and foster expansive discussion about the good is at odds with Rawls's requirement to condition and minimize what voices legitimately fall under public reason, what we might reasonably expect everyone to agree to. Although Rawls is not opposed to such deliberations as a matter of public discussion, when it comes to making a decision about policy, he thinks the best approach is one of public reason. Taylor's view of the interpretive nature of selfhood calls into question the notion that certain core ideas can be readily available for public reason, disconnected from the (often perfectionist) doctrines that initially generated them. Taylor shows that without attending to their historic and interpretive links these core ideas are inert or inarticulate, which makes him much less sanguine about the plausibility of public reason as a means to mutual recognition and solidarity.

IV. Rival Approaches and the Burdens of Interpretation

Modern pluralism, for Taylor, means that specific societies and polities make possible particular human goods and the realization of particular human potentialities. Like Berlin, Taylor urges political theorists to resist the "Procrustean" attempts to confine and reduce thinking about complex problems to a single, restrictive approach or solution.[61] To this day Taylor continues to attack both the kind of thinking about politics that proceeds as if "the socio-historical world comes simply packaged" and those that are oblivious to political realities, dwelling instead in "a dissociated world of self-enclosed theory."[62] This openness to learning and modification while possessing a basis for confidence, commitment, and even conviction has led both supporters and detractors to read Taylor as a proponent of "weak ontology."[63] For Taylor, clarifying the ontological question restructures the advocacy debate in important ways, but because answers to ontological questions do not

[61]On precisely the issue of the different styles of the politics of recognition and the variety of solutions to the challenge of democratic inclusion, Taylor states, "there are not too many things that one can say in utter generality. Solutions have to be tailored to particular situations" (Charles Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)," in *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*, ed. R. Bhargava, A. K. Bagchi, and R. Sudarshan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 163).

[62]Charles Taylor, "Response to Bromwich's 'Culturalism, the Euthanasia of Liberalism,'" *Dissent* 42 (Winter 1995): 103–4.

[63]Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jodi Dean, "A Politics of Avoidance: The Limits of Weak Ontology," *Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 55–65; Paul Saurette, "Questioning Charles Taylor's Contrarianism," *Political Theory* 32, no. 5 (2004): 723–33.

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automatically determine answers to questions of advocacy, they cannot settle any crucial moral or political controversy, not before what is at stake is experienced, interpreted, and articulated from the subjective views of its participants.[64] Taylor's practical epistemology and dialogic conception of policy formation dictates that the best interpretation is determined through comparative assessments between rival interpretations, which makes any "final" interpretation provisional by nature, only until a better one comes along.

Rather than decide the debate between liberals and communitarians so conceived, Taylor's view reconceptualized the stakes in the conflict and shifted the burden onto proceduralists to justify why ontological considerations should be bracketed for purposes of justification. Taylor's arguments about the deeper conditions of interpretation in many ways shifted the debate itself from one about the just distribution of individual and/or collective goods to one about the place of identity, difference, and multiculturalism in liberal theory. Thus, while the liberal theories of Rawls and Taylor are both clearly motivated by strong commitments to the importance of civic friendship and mutual recognition among free and equal persons, these commitments continued to get animated in their theories in remarkably different ways.

With increasing numbers of minority groups demanding recognition for their cultural or religious differences, and myriad groups claiming the right to participate in public life without compromising their identities, the issue of whether and to what extent we ought to demand that citizens within a democracy bracket their religious and philosophical views to deliberate in the language of public reason alone becomes all the more onerous.[65] The fact of multiculturalism requires traditional liberal theories to address how people might live together in difference in a democratic regime under conditions of fairness and equality, and to what extent democratic participation

[64]This notion of background conditions that shape but do not themselves determine answers is the main reason that many commentators, such as Stephen White, Ruth Abbey, Nicholas Smith, and myself, read Taylor as a "weak ontologist" as opposed to "strong." In contrast, other readers, such as Quentin Skinner and Paul Saurette, tend to portray a less historicist, less postmodern Taylor. See Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Paul Saurette, *The Kantian Imperative: Humiliation, Common Sense, Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

[65]Addressing the problem of pluralism by those committed to the idea of publicly giving reasons to justify decisions, policies, or laws has been the central concern of deliberative theorists, whether from a Rawlsian perspective or those more critical of it. For the former, see Samuel Freeman, "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (2000): 371–418; for the latter, see James Bohman and Henry Richardson, "Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and 'Reasons That All Can Accept,'" *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (2009): 253–74.

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necessitates a model of liberal toleration that requires citizens to conform to a single standard. At issue, however, is how to respond to a diversity of conceptions of the good within a political society in which membership is never fully voluntary for all. If we think that the fact of dominant institutions being biased in favor of a majority culture cannot be helped, and in any case would be bad to eliminate, then we would want to make certain accommodations for special rights for minorities. This is an argument that can be made within the confines of public reason. However, we might not think that the fact that dominant institutions are favored by a majority is a problem, if we think that everyone should have the right to participate, deliberate, organize, and vote based on their own comprehensive doctrines. This means of course that without a principle of public reason, dominant institutions will be animated by, and in turn support, a specific majority culture. So, at the same time we reject public reason, we would have to accept that it is legitimate for the majority to vote on the basis of its own conception of the good, with nothing to keep *this* from being exclusionary.

Rawls's shift to *Political Liberalism* and Taylor's more recent statements on particular issues of political concern such as human rights, secularism, and the burdens that may be placed on states appear to exhibit considerable movement from each side towards the other. Rawls's revisions of justice as fairness and his willingness to engage the deeper issue of human dignity display a considerable move towards Taylor. It is also notable that in recent years Taylor has shown some affinity for Rawls's idea of an "overlapping consensus" for trying to achieve political compromise in diverse societies and for trying to attain an unforced global consensus on human rights.[66] However, Taylor's endorsement of this Rawlsian feature for ensuring equal regard for different conceptions of the good should not be understood to signal broader agreement about the way the project of liberal theorizing should be conceived, nor about the way the particular idea of an overlapping consensus is endorsed. It remains too minimal an approach to democratic belonging and solidarity to satisfy Taylor's injunction for a more full-bodied debate about the good.[67]

[66]Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 107; Charles Taylor, "Religion and European Integration," in *Religion in the New Europe: Conditions of European Solidarity*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 16–17; Charles Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus of Human Rights," in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, eds. Joanne Bauer and Daniel Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 124–25, 143.

[67]Whether or not one regards the shift in Rawls's thinking over time as an improvement, both iterations exhibit these features. The idea of neutrality I am invoking follows both senses that Raz distinguished: "neutral political concern" and "exclusion of ideals" (Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 117).

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On Taylor's view, there are specific zones in public discourse where state neutrality is appropriate, and in such contexts an overlapping consensus will provide a necessary and useful starting point. In the long run, however, and in public discourse more generally, where citizen-to-citizen deliberation is concerned, a far more robust mutual understanding between citizens through comparison and contrast of qualitative characterizations will be required for a consensus wherein members with different cultural backgrounds aim to reach beyond mere overlap to better grasp the others' views of society, selfhood, and significance. Taylor has repeatedly invoked Gadamer's idea of the "fusion of horizons" according to which cross-cultural differences are mediated by the engagement itself.[68] To answer the normative question of what should be done, Taylor refers us to investigate directly the intersubjective meanings embedded in the social practices of particular societies. Given that normative standards are immanent, since such standards can only operate interpretively, not only will they be plural but they will also be deeply historicist, meaning that their course will not be able to be charted nor fixed in advance outside of their particular context of socially embedded contexts of meaning.[69] The fact that in normative discussion we cannot bypass the deeper interpretive backdrop of people's identities means also that they should not be bracketed in collective decision-making. Taylor admonishes readers to grapple with the need in democratic societies for all citizens to feel a part of the democratic "we."[70] And properly acknowledging how modern societies embody and endorse diversity, he thinks, requires a hermeneutic approach better to facilitate mutual recognition and incorporate a fuller spectrum of diverse perspectives within political discourse—even and especially when strong disagreement and discord suggests no apparent common ground.

When we juxtapose the conceptions of liberal values and of the scope and burdens of interpretation that Rawls and Taylor each hold, an important story emerges about how we might think about moral pluralism and the aims of political theory. Taylor's political theory is rooted in his particular view of the essential moral ontology of human agency. Contrary to what some

[68]Taylor adopts Gadamer's notion of "horizon" to emphasize the situatedness of all interpretations occurring within a tradition of discourse; and he employs Gadamer's view of the openness and flexibility of conceptual paradigms through the dialogical process of "fusion," for which both sides are necessary for greater understanding. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67–70.

[69]For a concise summary of this theme throughout a number of Taylor's essays, see Ruth Abbey and Naomi Choi, "Charles Taylor," in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, 8 vols. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

[70]Charles Taylor, "The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 4 (1998): 143–56.

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detractors have claimed, his notion of a distinctively human capacity for strong evaluation need not entail strong moral realist implications that depend on esoteric, metaphysical, presuppositions.[71] Rather, Taylor's concern with "the good" is best understood as calling attention to how conceptions of value and ideas about the good always and already thoroughly pervade social practices because of the interpretive nature of human agency. Taylor's hermeneutic strategy has to do with inquiring into the matrices of intersubjective meanings that create the specific social and political realities that are embodied in social practices, which he terms "social imaginaries."[72] Taylor's view is that however desirable the norm (e.g., of public reason) might be, it remains feckless without a deeper form of citizenship based on mutual recognition forged through dialogue.

If we grant Taylor that our considered convictions always require some particular historical narrative to be made sense of, it becomes problematic to then demand their systematization into a generic framework of goods that can be governed by the priority of right and public reason. Rawls persistently clings to the possibility of ordering our core ideas into a coherent theory against the merely ad hoc intuitionism he denounces. He operates with the meaning of equal treatment of persons as about securing the space for all reasonable religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines against the background of a consistent affirmation of the aim of neutrality across their differences. This is because Rawls was fairly optimistic that recognition could work within the scope of voluntary associations united by common philosophies. Among citizens generally, divided as they are not only by competing ethnic or cultural claims, but also by religious differences that involve competing and contradictory truth claims, justificatory neutrality appears the only feasible answer. Thus, his moral claim is that we can have a meaningful and lasting relationship of civic friendship and solidarity only by trying to maintain such a separation through justificatory neutrality between competing reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

On Taylor's view, this meaning of equal treatment will be inadequate without a more robust conception of democratic solidarity because the core ideas that constitute identity draw from and remain tied to very different sources and render them irreducibly plural, and therefore resistant to systematization. Beyond infeasibility, Taylor also finds the kind of social interchange that gets fostered by public reason alone to be undesirable. For Taylor, the task of political theory is to understand the plurality of conceptions of the good in any given society, and to find ways to foster dialogic policy-

[71]Other detractors have argued that Taylor's theory of recognition betrays a liberal tendency to continue *mis*recognizing some groups of people, e.g., the disabled. See Barbara Arneil, "Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory," *Political Theory* 37, no. 2 (2009): 218–42.

[72]Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

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formation, and to open the public sphere up to how multiple members of actual communities experience a concrete problem at hand.[73]

Conclusion

As several commentators have already noted, Taylor's arguments are best understood as efforts to theorize liberal values and their presuppositions, and to deepen our understanding of what sustains them as well as their history.[74] Taylor certainly has explored the long and diverse history of liberal ideas through canonical and less canonical figures, with the aim of narrating the roots of the modern and contemporary intellectual milieu in the West. But the argument of this paper is precisely to show how the norms and values he advocates have more to do with *how* norms and values—liberal or otherwise—might be theorized and defended in the present, an account that is distinct enough to have several rivals, but chief among them being the mode found in the legacy of modernist empiricism in Rawls and continued by many Rawlsians.[75]

In the tradition of Berlin and Hampshire, Taylor's mode of liberal theory strongly opposes what is commonly thought of as "analytic" liberal theory. With a decentered understanding of the rise of analysis, Taylor's views, then, appear to encourage both a continuation of as well as a challenge to the liberal tradition. As a challenge, he shows why it is misguided to strive to establish normative ethics from an ideal starting point outside of historical, social, and cultural practices. His wager is that we cannot separate the political principles, norms, and values we affirm—be it the moral neutrality of the state or the liberal ideal of the freedom of the individual to form and pursue one's own conception of the good—from the background conditions necessary to affirm those goods, such as the social institutions, cultural ethos,

[73]An example of what this might look like can be found in a recent project Taylor helped bring about on the issue of reasonable accommodation for ethnic or religious minorities in secular societies. The Taylor-Bouchard commission sought to inquire into the plural meanings embodied in various cultural practices through town hall meetings and careful cross-cultural dialogue, to better understand the variety of meanings that reflects the underlying goals of particular practices. The Bouchard-Taylor commission's report is available online at http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/bs1565996.

[74]Jeffrey Friedman, "The Politics of Communitarianism," *Critical Review* 8 (1994): 297–340. Ruth Abbey has described Taylor as a "theorist of liberal democracy who is both a liberal and a democrat" in "Pluralism in Practice: The Political Thought of Charles Taylor," *Critical Review of International and Social Political Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (2002); cf. Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 125.

[75]Rawls has maintained that his style of deontological liberalism is one among a range of possible approaches within liberal theory; yet many Rawlsians continue to take his approach to be coextensive with liberalism itself.

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intersubjective meanings about the good, and ideas about selfhood, that make something of value in the first place. Taylor's arguments also spur the continuation of the liberal tradition in that rather than repudiate the liberal ideals of freedom, equality, and individual autonomy, his ontological claims about human agency and strong evaluation are about better developing the liberal promise of treating all citizens as free and equal.

Each of the multiple theses Taylor has advanced—his synthesis of ideas from continental philosophy with approaches from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, his attack on the formalism of much of modern moral philosophy, his critique of the proceduralism of rights-based thinking, and his analysis of identity politics and the need to take self-interpretations into account in the explanation of behavior—denotes a concern to make sense of the multiplicity of actually or potentially conflicting standpoints that are informed by different and often rival accounts of goods, which may, in turn, be given by different and possibly conflicting judgments about them. Taylor has fundamentally taken issue with the modernist empiricist project to systematize our moral intuitions into regulative structures that can serve as a normative guide and to recast the entire problem of modern ethical pluralism in terms of tractable, reasonable disagreements among parties we can neutralize as minimally committed to mutual cooperation.

Excavating the particulars of divergent responses to modernist empiricism so as to read Taylor and Rawls as rivals for the right reasons might seem like a pedantic endeavor, of interest only to the smallest cadre of intellectual historians. Yet while the importance of Rawls even beyond the Anglophone world has been aptly demonstrated by the vast secondary literature on his writings, it is notable how little of it has been contextually informed until quite recently. With the requisite passage of time that enables critical historical reflection readers can hope to see more analysis and assessments of Rawls's place in history. Proper discussion of Rawls in context, however, will also have to include examination of how he converges with and diverges from Taylor, since the differences and similarities between their liberal theories have long been underappreciated; and their views, even when misconstrued, have routinely been taken for granted.[76]

The substantive difference between Rawls and Taylor is typically characterized as a confrontation between liberal and communitarian values. Yet this paper has shown that there has been far greater convergence on the norms they each advocate than has been acknowledged, while a more fundamental disagreement over method and approaches to justification divides them at

[76]Juxtaposing their contributions to liberal theory furnishes superb resources for thinking about the latter's past and future. This paper draws attention to several themes but in doing so my hope is to inspire further comparative studies, as none have appeared since Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 175–96.

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bottom and continues to go largely unnoticed. Comparing Rawls and Taylor in this way, and resisting their caricature, requires examining their provenance and emergence in historical context, and particularly how many of their views are rooted in an earlier debate about the promise of political philosophy in the wake of analysis.[77] Without a deeper understanding of the stakes between them and the ways in which Rawls and Taylor creatively adopted ideas from within a postanalytic context, we severely limit the extent to which we can debate fruitfully the relative merits of their contributions. What is more, careful examination of the postanalytic contributions of Rawls and Taylor to theorizing civic and humanist values allows us to generate important resources for thinking about the very powers and limits of political theory, the kind of justification of political power and principles it can offer, its ability to reconcile and/or criticize existing social and political conditions, and the extent to which political theory can structure and guide political practice.

[77]To my knowledge, there has heretofore been no other study in the scholarly literature that explicitly compares their approaches to liberal theory, or roots their differences in the shared context in which diverse analytic and postanalytic thinkers came to reinvent political philosophy in the Anglophone world.

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