

Psychotherapy and the Moral Realism of Charles Taylor
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There's long been an intriguing tension between the enterprise of psychotherapy and the values of those conducting it. In the early stages of the psychotherapy movement, the goal was to eliminate therapist values altogether, especially personal ones. "Leave your personal values at the therapy room door" seemed to be the maxim of most therapists. The concern was that the power of psychotherapists was so great that *any* values would unduly influence clients and contravene their autonomy to choose their own life path (Deutsch & Murphy, 1955; Ginsberg & Herma, 1953; Tjeltveit, 1986; American Psychological Association, 1992). More recently, many researchers and psychotherapists have realized that any such elimination of therapist values is practically impossible (Beutler & Bergan, 1991; Kelly, 1990; Patterson, 1989; Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003). Therapists cannot help but value their values. For this reason, it is now considered better to acknowledge their presence and take their impact into account than to assume their absence and leave their influence unrecognized (Slife, Scott, & McDonald, 2016).

The primary issue for therapists at this point is "which values?" If personal and professional values are inescapably involved in therapy, how can we know whether they are the right values? Even the widely held professional value of client autonomy—that the therapist should value the client's preferences above all—is itself merely a value. In fact, such individual autonomy has often been associated with problematic forms of liberal individualism, which is considered a prime cultural culprit of many client problems (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Chen, Nettles, & Chen, 2009). Indeed, if the client's values are always to hold sway, what happens if those values are somehow part of the client's problem? How then are the right or best values decided? As obviously difficult as these questions are, they are surely at the heart of what therapists *strive* to do and *actually* do in practice. Yet, they have rarely been considered in therapy research.

The purpose of this chapter is to begin to address this moral "heart" of therapy directly. It does so through the work of Charles Taylor, one of the most revered and thoughtful hermeneutic moral realists of the past six decades (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Taylor, 1959; 1969; 1979; 1989; 1994c; 2007). If Taylor is right, therapeutic ignorance of the moral ecology of ordinary therapeutic practice is a pivotal ignorance, especially because our core identities and a critical approach to change hinge on them. Indeed, these issues are so important to Taylor that some observers believe his "entire philosophy" and life project is all about practices as the primary source of moral guidance (Brinkman, 2011, p. 71). And given that therapists and clients both appear—from Taylor's broad definition—to engage in practices, Taylor's hermeneutic approach could conceivably illuminate the moral heart of therapeutic practice itself, including the identity of the professional therapist as well as potential "change interventions" into the practices affecting the identities of clients.

Taylor's Understanding of Morality

To grasp Taylor's approach, we first need to provide some clarification of his understanding of

morality. We could probably start with a central claim: “humans are self-interpreting animals” (Taylor, 1985a, p. 4). This claim doesn’t mean that individuals can make themselves into millionaires just by interpreting themselves as such. Rather, Taylor is at least partly implying that humans are self-*evaluators* in the moral sense. Human communities of interpreters constitute the moral meanings of their self-interpretations through their historical traditions and, more importantly for our purposes, their community practices. Taylor believes that if we can articulate these background practices, we can get in touch with the values and goods that animate and define them, which in turn animate and define us as persons.

Practice as Moral Orientation

The notion of practice means more to Taylor than merely engaging in physical activities. He holds that any given practice cannot be meaningful without some orienting sense of the forms of participation and intrinsic standards that are required for competent or excellent performance in the practice (Brinkmann, 2004; 2011; Sugarman, 2006; Taylor, 1989; Yanchar & Slife, in press). Other portions of this book discuss more complex practices (e.g., teaching, publishing, truck driving), and we will later discuss marriage and therapy as practices in this sense. However, let us begin with a deceptively simple practice—riding a bicycle—to get to some of the rudiments of practice according to Taylor.

Two forms of participation in learning to ride a bike involve maintaining one’s balance and avoiding pedestrians. Now for many people the latter—avoiding pedestrians—will seem more “moral,” more like a value, than the former—maintaining balance. However, Taylor views both as part of the “shoulds” and “oughts” of bicycle riding: one *should* maintain balance and one *ought* to avoid pedestrians. Both activities are moral because they matter and have merit in bike-riding. Both are also connected to broader senses of morality because losing one’s balance and hitting a pedestrian can result in significant harm. In this sense, these activities are orienting reference points for riding a bike that can be said to be intrinsic moral standards, because without them the practice does not exist.

In fact, one of the striking aspects of the moral reference points for any practice is that humans do not invent or construct them. Practices such as bicycle riding require, even demand, the micro-values that serve as reference points in performing the practice. One simply cannot ride a bike without maintaining balance and avoiding pedestrians. These moral requirements are *real* in the sense of non-arbitrary and non-subjective, because they are situated in real contexts with real equipment. To be sure, the shoulds and oughts of bike-riding can vary to some degree from one context to another, such as professional racing to casual play, but the moral themes of balance and pedestrian avoidance still exist across many cultures and eras. Engaging in these moral themes allows humans as self-interpreting animals to know, at least in part, what matters to those engaged in the practice.

Even so, the ordinary ethic inherent in practices can seem too ordinary to matter. Maintaining bicycle balance will seem trivial to many in our simplified illustration. Nevertheless, what is viewed as trivial is itself part of the interpretation of the self-interpreter according to Taylor. From the formalist or deontological ethical tradition, for instance, morality is interpreted as a set

of profound philosophical principles derived from formal and deep reflection. If this tradition is in mind, the moral dictum to “maintain one’s bicycle balance” will surely seem trivial. However, from the perspective of Taylor’s hermeneutic tradition, the profound philosophical principles of the other tradition might be the more trivial, primarily because they are so thin and abstract that they rarely apply to anything we truly encounter in our practical lives. The more significant values, in this sense, are those everyday micro-values that allow us to get things done, know how to get better, and clarify who we are in the process.

The Moral Pluralism of Practice

One of the intriguing aspects of personal and particular practices is that there can be so many of them. There are not only different practices, from bike riding to marriage, but also the practices themselves are embedded within different situations and cultures. For these reasons, Taylor believes in a multiplicity of goods. Some may be quite general, while others have a more limited collectivity, such as the nation, and still others are more particular and specific to cultures or groups (Abbey, 2014; Taylor, 1985b, p. 244). These goods are not only plural in the quantitative sense but also plural in the qualitative sense. That is, they can involve qualitatively different types that “cannot always be harmoniously combined into principles or reduced to some more ultimate or foundational good” (Abbey, 2014, p. 12). Indeed, some things worthy of affirmation are irreconcilable with others. As Taylor says, “There is no guarantee that universally valid goods should be perfectly combinable, and certainly not in all situations” (Taylor, 1989, p. 61).

This moral pluralism runs counter to the usual Western forms of morality, such as a code of ethics or a set of principles. Taylor’s practice emphasis means that we need to unlearn some of our Western habits of understanding, specifically the way we tend to abstract morality from practice (e.g., formalism, deontology). Too often, from Taylor’s perspective, people in the West want to emulate the reductionism of the natural sciences and establish laws and principles of morality. As Taylor would see it, this desire is a “deeply entrenched intellectual habit or outlook characteristic of our kind of society. . . . Single principle explanations work against complex, multi-faceted understandings of human life, but they benefit from association with the tremendous prestige of natural science explanations that . . . seem to reduce complex phenomena to single principles and laws.” (Taylor, 1994c, p. 177). However, he believes that the world is just too diverse and complex to be abstracted or categorized in this manner.

Still, if Taylor is right and we take seriously the plurality of moral practices, we return to the problem at the outset of this chapter: which values are better? What happens when moral values conflict? Taylor realizes that the most dominant approach to this plurality in Western culture is to assume that these questions cannot really be addressed at all, that no values or moral frameworks are better than any other values or frameworks—relativism. Relativism presumes that all individual preferences and cultural values are fundamentally equivalent in their goodness and that moral distinctions are more apparent rather than real (see Introductory Chapter). Taylor explicitly rejects this dominant understanding. Indeed, to assume the ultimate equality of moral frameworks is to deny morality altogether, because the purpose of morality is to distinguish what has worth or merit, what is good over what is not as good.

Strong Evaluation

How then does Taylor recognize the plurality of morality and yet answer the moral realist question of which values are better? His answer concerns our ability to evaluate the goods of our lives, what he calls “strong evaluation.” This term captures Taylor’s belief that individuals rank some of their desires, or the goods that they desire, as qualitatively higher or more worthy than others. Our capacity for strong evaluations harkens back to the human capacity for self-interpretation (Taylor, 1985a, p. 4), because these interpretations are moral in nature: “the qualitative distinctions we make between different actions, or feelings, or modes of life, as being in some way morally higher or lower, noble or base, admirable or contemptible . . . are central to our moral thinking and ineradicable from it” (Taylor 1985b, p. 234).

To understand what strong evaluation is, it might be helpful to know what it isn’t. In keeping with its non-abstractive nature, this moral capacity isn’t necessarily a philosophical reflection on a practice or on morality itself. As Taylor puts it, “I don’t consider it a condition of acting out of a strong evaluation that one has articulated and critically reflected on one’s framework . . . I mean simply that one is operating with a sense that some desires, goals, aspirations are qualitatively higher than others” (Taylor, 1994b, p. 249). Strong evaluation is not a moral principle in the formalist or deontological tradition: “follow your strong evaluations.” Strong evaluations not only can conflict for an individual; an individual may not act in accordance with the objects of their strong evaluation (Taylor, 1989, p. 62). If anything, Taylor believes that the moral tradition of the West has been detrimental to the place of qualitative distinctions between higher and lower values in moral life (Taylor, 1989, pp. 84, 90). These philosophies emphasize the abstraction of morality and thus tend to suppress the role of practical qualitative distinctions in practical moral living (Abbey, 2014).

Strong evaluations are also not relativistic or subjectivistic. Unlike relativism, Taylor believes that values and moral frameworks *can* distinguish worth and merit. He specifically denies, for example, the claim of relativist Jean Paul Sartre that we are fundamentally clueless about moral choices because we ultimately have no criteria or priorities to direct these decisions (Taylor, 1985a, p. 29–33). As we will see in applying strong evaluation to therapy (below), Taylor describes intriguing ways of distinguishing which rival goods are better. Similarly, morality is not merely subjective, relegated to individual preferences and desires: “I want to speak of strong evaluation when the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire” (Taylor, 1985b, p. 120). In this sense, he views strong evaluations as grounded in the morally real: “Strongly valued goods command the respect of individuals because of their intrinsic value; they are experienced as making calls or demands upon individuals, rather than being freely or arbitrarily chosen by them” (Taylor, 1989, p. 4, 20). As we engage our therapy example, we will see how Taylor recurs to “human constants” that belie mere subjectivity and ground the intrinsic value of strongly valued goods.

Therapy Practice for Marital Practice

Can Taylor’s moral approach to practice inform psychotherapy practice, specifically marital

therapy? First, there's no question that he would consider marriage a practice with moral reference points. He would readily acknowledge that this practice is influenced greatly by individual preferences, historical developments, and cultural values, which are themselves part of the moral reference points. However, even with these differences across marriages, there are important moral shoulds and oughts involved in many if not all of these specific practices, such as prioritizing the marital partner or desiring a quality relationship, however these practices are contextually expressed.

In fact, it is the recognition of these *particular* contextual factors that allow the ordinary ethic of marriage to be more clearly specified. Put differently, the contextual particularities of each marital situation can help us to understand even better the logic of the particular moral reference points involved. In the context of American marriages, for example, marital practice typically implies signs of affection (e.g., a touch, a kiss, a service) as well as personal recognition between partners at times of greetings and partings (e.g., a gesture, "I love you"). In this sense, a particular configuration of contextual factors, such as being American, can allow greater knowledge of the moral logic of the relationship, including what a good or bad marriage means within the culture.

How would a marital therapist, informed by Taylor's understanding of practical morality, go about helping a bad marriage become better? Taylor would seem to suggest at least two moral moves: articulation of the moral background and consideration of the good that is better.

Articulation

Articulation helps people to become aware of and understand the practice values of which they were unaware. Articulation is itself a self-interpretation of sorts because it foregrounds many of the strongly held values and moral frameworks that people live by and remain in the background of their awareness.¹ It is typically only in times of conflict or crisis that we spell out and defend the assumptions and presuppositions that underlie our moral values and practices (Taylor, 1989a, p. 9). Because of the latent quality of underlying sources of moral values, practices, and attitudes, an important role of moral theory and perhaps even good psychotherapy for Taylor is articulation, bringing into awareness certain facets of that which is unspoken but presupposed (Abbey, 2014, p. 41).

For this reason, Taylor would contend that these "latent" micro-values or ordinary ethics drive the practices of problem marriages. In other words, whether good or bad marriages, all are practice-based with orienting moral reference points that lead marital partners to treat one another the way they do. Indeed, from a therapeutic perspective, marital partners can even be "congratulated" and perhaps even praised in marital therapy (a type of therapeutic "positive reframing") for their morality, because they are never without some type of values. Both partners may even be said to care about the other partner and the marriage itself, no matter how misguided their values may be. The central issue, then, is what these values are and whether they appropriately serve the practice of the particular marriage.

The partners may, of course, have conscious knowledge of some of their values, but Taylor's

contention is that there are often, if not always, core background values that both partners have not labeled or conceptualized. These unconscious values are obviously difficult to change until they are identified and put into question. Generally, articulating this tacit background of moral life requires eliciting the ideals that draw people to a particular moral outlook and inspiring them to act in accord with it. More particularly, Taylor describes six related functions of articulation that may facilitate this process in therapy (Abbey, 2014, p. 40-47). We only have space for a brief explanation of each here, but we follow these explanations with a therapy case for illustration:

1. Deepen understanding by showing what underpins moral values and actions; “to articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses” (Taylor, 1989, p. 26);
2. Heighten awareness of the complexity (and messiness) of moral goods; Taylor hopes that understanding the plurality of goods will reduce the appeal of theories that artificially harmonize different goods (Taylor, 1989, p. 107).
3. Awareness increases the chances of rational examination; “conflicts by themselves don’t refute. But this doesn’t mean that they are unarbitratable, or insurmountable” (Taylor, 1994a, p. 204).
4. Articulation provides a corrective to “the [self-] enforced inarticulacy” of much modern moral philosophy; Taylor argues that these theories are not helpful for fostering the qualitative discriminations that are necessary to moral life (Taylor, 1995b, p. 153).
5. Some revealed values are problems, but others need to be reinvigorated; “a moral source is something that when turned toward and articulated can empower one to act in a way prescribed by the full moral view” (Taylor, 1994c, p. 184).
6. After identifying the good that originally inspired, marital partners can appreciate how practices have distorted this vision or other possibilities they could nourish; “retrieving [moral sources] might allow us to recover some balance...” (Taylor, 1991, p. 96).

Marital Therapy Case. As part of an actual marital therapy case, George (name changed)—a prominent attorney in town—could not understand why he so easily “goes off” verbally on his wife (quotes from George), frequently alienating her. George, in this sense, could not understand his own motives, which for Taylor ultimately involve the moral reference points of his practice of marriage. To articulate these reference points, the therapist attempted to “deepen understanding” of his hidden values, specifically through the question of “what makes moral sense of [your] actions” (#1 articulation function above). Through the ensuing discussion, George soon realized that he dealt with his wife “very aggressively” as if an aggressive response was necessary to “win the moral high ground.” This understanding helped him to realize the familiarity of this moral position in another context, that of his law practice. “Too frequently,” he felt he had to respond aggressively to other lawyers to win the moral high ground in legal cases.

This consistency between his law practice and his marital practice helped him to pinpoint another important moral reference point he’d long held but never put into words: “moral integrity involves complete consistency.” George had long assumed that his integrity required similar actions regardless of the difference in circumstances. To treat people differently when the

“moral high ground” was at stake was to be “fake” or have a “double standard.” Consequently, he treated his wife like he treated opposing attorneys. However, and in line with #2 (above), the therapist encouraged him to consider that different contexts might allow different values, something that George, a religious man, had to consider carefully (#3). With some urging from the therapist, George explored the possibility that he was misinterpreting some religious precepts (#4). And as a result, he relented on the “consistency” of his moral integrity in the favor of “making an exception” regarding his “sweet wife.” He believed his religion held that love trumped even the possibility of a “double standard” in this regard (#5). George not only acted less aggressively toward her in marital arguments but also “let her win most of the time,” leading to a “much happier home life” (#6).

Deciding the Better

At this point, we could certainly argue that George’s interaction with the therapist helped to change his moral reference points. However, we could also understand this interaction as the therapist using “immanent critique” to resolve George’s marital problems (Brinkman, 2011, p. 70). Immanent critique, in this case, would mean that George realized through therapy a conflict in his moral reference points and opted through moral examination for a moral reference point that he strongly evaluated as higher, his love for his wife. In this sense, George did not so much change his values as become more consonant with them, which does not differentiate moral realism from moral anti-realism. As an example of the latter, George could have been viewed as ultimately acting in consonance with his personal preferences (his love values over his consistency values), which do not have to be considered any more *real* or any more moral, necessarily, than anyone else’s preferences. In other words, his preferences could be considered merely subjective or even arbitrary in nature.

A more important test of Taylor’s moral realism is a therapeutic situation in which the therapist believes the client’s own perceived values need to change in better alignment with the real and non-subjective values of the client’s practices. Although, as we will see, this situation is more prevalent in the practice of therapy than typically realized, the moral foundations of modern psychology have no resources for dealing with it. Therapists are ethically prohibited from “imposing” their values on clients (American Psychological Association, 2010), and the client is considered to have ultimate autonomy, disallowing the therapist from countermanding the client’s values and goals (American Psychological Association, 2010). How, then, might Taylor’s moral realist approach provide some resources for addressing this ethical dilemma? Taylor actually points to two aspects of deciding the good, contextual comparison and human constants.

First, good values are those that enrich our practices by enabling us to lead *better* lives. We italicize “better” here because Taylor does not believe that a truly situated or contextual understanding of the moral, from the hermeneutic perspective, can provide any kind of complete or final understanding—a “best” for all time. It can only provide a moral superiority to its rival, not a superiority across all cultures or eras. As Schwandt (2000) put it, “For Taylor, what counts as better interpretation is understood as justified movement from one interpretation to another” (p. 202). Still, the issue is what *justifies* this movement when comparing one moral context to

another. Here Taylor points to what Nicholas Smith (2002) calls “epistemic gain”: “as one interpretation makes more sense of the phenomenon than a rival one, by resolving contradictions in the rival interpretation, for instance, or by bringing otherwise hidden aspects more clearly into view” (p. 125). This approach to justification could perhaps account for the case of George. Hidden aspects of his religion came “into view,” allowing him to move away from one set of reference points to another.

The second aspect that Taylor believes is often needed to decide good interpretations are “human constants” (Taylor, 1981, p. 205; cf. Smith, 2002, p. 125). Although he is exquisitely sensitive to the diversity of moral values among individuals and across cultures, Taylor believes some goods are common to all moral codes and strongly valued by all cultures.ⁱⁱ These constants revolve around the idea of the value of human life and the dignity of the person: “Every moral system has a conception of what we might call human dignity, . . . of the quality which, in man, compels us to treat him with respect, or . . . a conception which defines what it is to have respect for human beings” (Taylor 1986, p. 53). Again, the case of George could be seen as involving a “constant” of humanity. After George realized and articulated the background reference points that led to his unproductive fights with his wife, he opted instead for the dignity and respect of his marital partner, something that he experienced as having intrinsic value.

Even so, Taylor does not mean that this “intrinsic value” or its relation to human constants is somehow independent of George’s practices. Formalist principles are often abstracted from practices through philosophical reflection and considered good in themselves, separable from humans. Taylor’s human constants, on the other hand, are the constants of humans, and thus are human-dependent generalities, by definition (Taylor 1989, p. 59). They stem from the good that human beings experience, which command their respect in a non-anthropocentric way, as neither deriving solely from human will nor depending only on the fact of individual affirmation (Taylor, 1989, p. 342).ⁱⁱⁱ

Other Therapy Applications

Now that we understand some of the tools that Taylor believes are available to the hermeneutic moral realist, such as contextual comparisons and human constants, let us return to the therapeutic dilemma posed at the outset of this section—the therapist’s conviction that a client’s values are wrong for them. We should first note that this dilemma is not really as rare in therapy as it might seem, though it’s rarely made this explicit. In fact, it is tempting to say on Taylor’s behalf that therapists are likely not only to routinely discuss values with clients but also to frequently urge clients to modify their values (Fowers, 2005; Slife, Scott, & McDonald, 2016).

As a prominent case in point, consider the suicidal client. To be suicidal, by definition, means that clients affirm the value of killing themselves. Clearly, some therapists would protest this moral characterization, contending that many suicidal people are merely “irrational,” and thus “not thinking clearly” as they move toward suicide. Taylor, however, would undoubtedly note that this valuing of rationality, especially this particular view of rationality, is itself a hidden therapist value. To override a client’s clear desire to kill oneself because the therapist has decided that this desire is “irrational” is still to deny the client’s autonomy over their own desires

and values. And what if the client wishes to be “irrational” in a non-lethal sense, say, at a party—“to have fun”? Few therapists would object to this irrationality. No, the real reason that therapists resist a client’s desire to commit suicide, Taylor would likely suggest, is its clear connection to the dignity and value of life—the human constants that can ground strong evaluations. Indeed, as a testament to these constants, this evaluation is so strong that therapists apparently value them more than the pervasive professional value of protecting client autonomy.

Still another example of therapists fairly routinely aspiring to change a client’s values might illustrate Taylor’s approach to comparison. Consider how empirical research has shown that “open-minded” therapists—presumably those who are *especially* open to the client’s values—do not accept the values of “closed-minded” clients (e.g., Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003). These therapists, instead, attempt to influence their closed-minded clients to become more open-minded like them, in clear violation of the professional value of client autonomy as well as important disciplinary ethical principles that disallow the imposition of therapist values (American Psychological Association, 2010). What is going on here, especially when such therapists are rarely, if ever, brought up on ethical charges? Similar to the issue of suicide, there appears to be an implicit disciplinary understanding that such ethical violations are somehow appropriate. Yet in this case, the therapist’s attempt to “convert” the client to open-mindedness is not as clearly related to human constants.

As several observers of psychotherapy have noted (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, 2008; Slife, Scott, & McDonald, 2016), there are pervasive professional and cultural values that lead therapists to assume that closed-mindedness cannot possibly be the right value for a client’s life. Here, the therapist becomes aware of and provides labels for a potential comparison of two or more client practices—what Taylor would consider a “language of perspicuous contrast,” which then allows the client to “formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities...” (Taylor, 1981, p. 205). One could certainly question whether therapists *should* attempt to change their clients’ closed-mindedness, but the issue here is how easily the therapist justifies the change in the client’s values, in spite of significant ethical principles to the contrary.

We believe in this case that Taylor would point to practices within the professional community, which contain within them background moral reference points that therapists only dimly recognize, if at all. Indeed, it is because these values are relatively unrecognized that they may be so automatically deployed. In any case, the “open-minded” therapist is yet another example of the therapeutic need to change client values. The clear advantage of Taylor’s hermeneutic moral realism is that therapists, and perhaps their clients too, understand not only *that* they are doing so but also *what* moral reference points are involved.

Conclusion

For many readers, the application of Taylor’s moral philosophy to psychotherapy is an improbable application, at best. Yet, it is easy to see how Taylor might appreciate this kind of implementation, not to mention the moral resources this application might provide the field of psychotherapy. Taylor does not seem to comment on psychotherapy in this regard, at least that we can find, but many of his writings could certainly be marshaled in the support of such

employment, especially when it seems that Taylor is as concerned with human identity and change as therapists are.

With respect to the former, Taylor clearly believes that background practices reveal the core identities of the people who inhabit them, whether they are professional practices (e.g., therapy, business) or personal practices (e.g., marriage, friendship). Indeed, he declares explicitly that “your identity is therefore defined by certain evaluations which are inseparable from ourselves as agents. Shorn of these we would cease to be ourselves” (Taylor, 1985a, p. 34). Values and goods provide important yardsticks of personal success or failure, development or decline. Acting in accordance with or furtherance of them brings a sense of pride, satisfaction and achievement whereas acting against or ignoring it leaves one with a sense of failure or dejection (Taylor, 1995, p. 142). Are not these goods also the concerns of many psychotherapists?

Clearly also, articulating our background practices provides a vital avenue of change that has been relatively overlooked in our value-averse psychotherapy culture. By becoming more aware of and then articulating the values laden in these frequently unconscious practices, Taylor argues that we can sometimes modify them, as with the case of George. Indeed, are not many therapists already sensitized to, if not trained in, making the unconscious conscious? Would it be that much of a stretch to uncover the ordinary ethics of vital human practices such as marriage in this manner? The way to do this uncovering is *not* to strip them of their values-oriented “biases” to get to their objective and pristine nature, which is the training of many therapy institutions. Rather, it is to articulate the moral reference points that define and motivate these practices, allowing them to stand in bold relief so that they can be examined, compared, and the good located in relation to human constants as well as its unique context.

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Footnotes

ⁱTaylor: “our attempts to formulate what we hold important must, like descriptions, strive to be faithful to something. But what they strive to be faithful to is not an independent object with a fixed degree and manner of evidence, but rather a largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance” (as cited in Choi, 2009, p. 709).

ⁱⁱ Some commentators accuse Taylor of essentialism here (e.g., Bohman, 1991), meaning that Taylor relies on metaphysical assumptions that are “uninterpreted human constants” (p. 133), which would violate his hermeneutic tenets. However, we agree with Smith (2002) that Taylor’s human constant is “simply the embeddedness of human beings in the world and there need to cope with it” (p. 134), which means these constants are the constants of human interpreted experience.

ⁱⁱⁱUntil a moral theory emerges that can explain the human urge to consider goods as if they had an independent existence, Taylor believes that moral realism is the most persuasive approach to moral life.