Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues[1]

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The concept of weak ontology does not so much name a doctrine as gesture toward a thicket of philosophical issues. If the concept has had any resonance, then it is because others have found themselves struggling as well with one difficult pathway or another in this thicket.

Given this situation, a useful way to introduce weak ontology might be to sketch its genealogy in the simple sense of showing how I found my way into this thicket and tried to make myself at home in it.[2] One benefit of proceeding in this fashion is that it may help make clear exactly why, in *Sustaining Affirmation*, I rounded up

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[2] This is one way of thinking of "home" when reflecting upon Heidegger's comment about: "becoming at home in not being at home" (*das Heimischwerden im Unheimishsein*); Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymne "Der Ister"* (1942) *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 53 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984) 147.

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such *unusual* suspects—William Connolly, Charles Taylor, George Kateb, and Judith Butler—charged them collectively with the misdemeanor of weak ontology, and forced them to perform community service within my text. In the second part of this essay, I will lay out some of the issues related to weak ontology that seem to me to be most in need of further reflection and elaboration.

Genealogy of the Project

I began academic life in the 1970s as an orthodox Habermasian with a strong commitment to the idea that language has a telos (understanding) and to the associated interpretation of Western modernity as something like a progressive embodiment of that telos.[3] Somehow, I did not feel that this was really a variant of foundationalism; or at least it did not seem so compared to, say, Straussianism or political theory tied to Christianity. As the influence of post-structuralism and postmodernism grew in the mid-1980s, I spent a good deal of time responding to critiques of Jürgen Habermas from anti-foundationalist perspectives. It just seemed clear to me that all of them failed to comprehend that their critiques ran afoul of what Habermas famously called the norm of "performative contradiction"—in short, the very practice of their criticism necessarily entailed commitment to an implicit notion of reason and possible consensual understanding.[4]

The apparent solidity of my thinking came under increasing pressure in the late 1980s as I encountered Martin Heidegger's work, as well as that of increasingly sophisticated interpreters of Michel Foucault. As a result of this, I came to see that my Habermasianism indeed constituted a clear sort of foundationalism. But this realization did not induce any great intellectual crisis on my part. I still felt that Habermasian commitments were, in an ethical-political sense, good ones; only now I had to begin to conceive of them as reflecting "merely" my "deepest level of interpretation" of the world.[5] In short, we all have recourse to a final level of meaning, at which we have some reasons for our particular interpretive frame, but none that have foundational force in the traditional sense.

At this point, I felt I had reached a defensible sort of nonfoundationalist position. But the more I thought about this, the more I became convinced that what I thought was

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3   Stephen White, "Rationality and the Foundations of Political Philosophy," *The Journal of Politics* (November 1979): 1156–71.

4   Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 51 ff.

5   Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 140–42; and "Postmodern Aesthetics and Political Thinking," *The Aesthetics of the Critical Theorists: Benjamin, Marcuse, Adorno and Habermas*, ed. R. Roblin (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990) 516–17.

a comfortable resting place was, in fact, just the beginning of a slide into a whole new tangle of questions. One reason I began to slide had to do with my further engagement with poststructural and postmodern positions. Even though I was now openly nonfoundationalist, I was still convinced that many nonfoundationalists held deficient views because they tended to avoid confronting and defending their own deepest levels of interpretation. If they were to do so, their deficiencies vis-à-vis my Habermasian one would quickly become apparent. In sum, I was still in the unmasking business.

Here is where William Connolly's work began to make me slide. He clearly does not avoid this deepest level of reflection; on the contrary, he has carefully articulated it, drawing profoundly upon Foucault and Nietzsche. Moreover, he has for a long while referred to speculation at this level as ontology.[6] Connolly's ontology not only taught me a methodological lesson, but also constituted a powerful substantive challenge to my Habermasian commitments.

A second reason for further sliding was that I increasingly began to sense that my non-foundationalism had a kind of implicit smugness or self-certainty about it in relation to theistic positions. Once this began to dawn on me, I was continually stunned at how nonfoundationalists in general tended to dismiss theism out of hand. Richard Rorty is perhaps archetypical of this bent. Recall his oft-expressed judgment that recurrence to any ontology of transcendence, to anything beyond the human, is essentially like a compulsion to scratch what we can now see is really only an imaginary itch. But this kind of dismissal just won't do. To my mind, the only powerful argument for nonfoundationalism is that, despite countless efforts to find strong foundations throughout history, none has garnered the kind of universal agreement that would be necessary to warrant its truth. And the only claim against theists that this argument actually warrants would be something like: "You theists think that your particular scratching technique will stop the itching, but this technique just does not work for everyone." A nonfoundationalist might, indeed, want to go even further and raise doubts about the itch itself, but this is at most one of many possible suggestions as to how we might orient ourselves in the present. And those who offer such a suggestion cannot legitimately frame it in a fashion that implies that theism is obviously something we clear-thinkers have gotten beyond.

Having slid this far, it seemed to me that we nonfoundationalists needed to make our own ontologies more explicit, more robust, more felicitous—in short, better competitors with foundationalist positions. It is in this context that I began employing the distinction between weak ontologies and strong ones, the latter being foundationalist in the traditional sense.

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6   William Connolly, "Taylor, Foucault and Otherness," *Political Theory* (August 1985): 355–71.

As I started to reflect on what makes for a felicitous weak ontology, I increasingly real-
ized that my phrase "deepest level of interpretation" embodied a serious misconstrual.
It makes our ontological figuration seem to be just one further deployment of a familiar
kind of meaning analysis, the only difference being that we are clarifying the very last
meanings in a long line. The problem, however, is that at this deepest level many famil-
iar analytical categories and operations become blurred or exhibit torsional effects. For
example, the more I pondered the relation between ethics and ontology, the more they
seemed mutually constitutive at this level and the less possible it seemed to accord one
or the other clear primacy, as Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas claimed they could do
in opposite ways. Similarly, at the ontological level, reason and affect, which modern
analytical philosophy has done so much to separate, seemed to entangle themselves
in peculiar ways. And, finally, our relation to language
at the ontological level seemed to robustly exhibit the
qualities Heidegger called to our attention when he said
that we don't have language; rather it has us. In the light
of such insights, it became quite apparent that the bland
phrase "deepest level of interpretation" just does not ade-
quately signal the strange multiplicity of things that go
on at this level.

*...at issue here is not where
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basic commitments, theistic
or otherwise.*

It was at this point that the full significance of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* began
to dawn on me.[7] Taylor reorients how we understand the process of practical reason.
He replaces the familiar picture of agents sovereignly choosing and calculating their
way through the world with one of agents articulating the ontological "sources" that
animate their lives and constitute their world. The fact that Taylor was so useful to me
in thinking further about weak ontology made it imperative that I get absolutely clear
about how to disentangle his distinctive picture of practical reason from the strong,
theistic ontological position to which I thought it was tied. But the more I reflected on
this question, the more I suspected that Taylor's way of comprehending his Christian
sources might actually qualify as a weak ontology.

From the point of view of a strict secularist, religion is to be kept out of the public
sphere. In essence, there is a spatial image: at issue is *where* you carry your theistic
ontological commitments. The distinction between strong and weak ontology relies in
the first instance on a different image: at issue here is not where but *how* you carry your
most basic commitments, theistic or otherwise. For both strong and weak ontologists,
commitments at this most basic level will, of course, have a kind of animating force to
them, since they play a constitutive role in my reason, affect, and identity. This means
that the carrying metaphor is slightly misleading. At this level of meaning, one cannot

7   Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
    Press, 1989).

cleanly separate self and foundation; in short, what one is carrying is oneself. But one can do it in different ways.

Consider one extreme example. In the wake of 9/11, President George W. Bush began to refer frequently to evil.[8] It was evident that he felt he had found a word of great significance. Going on the basis of his demeanor and subsequent actions, it seems as though that word simultaneously exuded both a sublime power to steel the will and a deeply comforting balm. The unambiguous naming of evil helped Bush to radically simplify the world, to galvanize his righteousness, to draw a shining boundary between us and evil, and, finally, to clear his conscience of doubts. This continual interplay of words and theistic ontology creates a frame for action in which others who disagree are rapidly transformed into obstacles and enemies.

Contrast the way Bush carried and was carried by his mantra of evil with how the Reverend Billy Graham carried himself in his speech at the memorial ceremony on September 14, 2001, at the Episcopal National Cathedral.[9] Graham has, of course, been something like middle-America's Protestant every-minister for several decades, so his appearance among the speakers was not surprising. But what he had to say did surprise me a bit. Predictably, he, like Bush, said he felt that the events of 9/11 had brought him into the presence of evil. But, unpredictably, as soon as he had invoked evil, Graham admitted that it was not something he could fully grasp, despite many years of effort. It remained always shrouded in mystery, and he ultimately could not speak articulately about it. In positioning himself in this way, Graham seemed to be drawing on some source within his Christianity that held him back from embracing the fateful circuit of accelerating self-righteousness and that denied him the comfort of having a certain hold upon the distinction between good and evil, us and the enemy.

I am aware, of course, that in the more distant past Graham has made clearly anti-Semitic remarks.[10] Here I am only suggesting that in one particular speech and with regard to the particular (but crucial) concept of evil, there was a weak ontological moment in how he affirmed his faith, and it contrasted sharply with Bush's mode of affirmation.

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8   For the first references, see his speeches on 9/11, 9/12 ("This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail."), and 9/13 at, respectively: <www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothenation.htm>; <www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911cabinetroomaddress.htm>; and <www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911memonationaldayofprayerandremembrance.htm>. The web page for the "USA Freedom Corps," the new umbrella organization for Americorps, features a photograph of President Bush surrounded by small children; the banner next to it calls citizens to "love someone, mentor a child, stand up to evil…"; see <www.usafreedomcorps.gov/>. As of February 2004, the language of evil suddenly disappeared from this website.

9   For Graham's remarks, see <www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/bgrahammemorialgo.htm>.

10 In 2002, declassified tapes from the Nixon White House revealed that Graham and Nixon chatted about the Jewish "stranglehold" on the American media; see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1850077.stm>.

It is perhaps the case that religions with an omnipotent creator-god have the most diffi-culty avoiding strong ontological formulations. Creation by a subject entails intention-ality, and the *created* are presumed bound in some way to conform to those intentions. What then could provide a more powerful sense of affirmation and self-righteousness than to know and feel that your words and will have tapped directly into divine inten-tionality?

What was striking to me about Charles Taylor's Christianity was that it does not allow for such a direct plugging into divine will. For him, the articulation of moral sources is always fraught with partiality, uncertainty, and incompleteness. One simply cannot get beyond an "ethics of inarticulacy."[11] There is, however, the notion of a horizon at which one imagines the possibility of a kind of universal reconciliation of humanity. Accordingly, life has the character of a journey toward that imagined horizon. Now the image of a journey toward a divinely ordained reconciliation can, of course, be quite dangerous in the sense that those one confronts on this journey can easily be rendered obstacles in one's path. But when this image of a journey is framed by the sense of inarticulacy in regard to one's ontological sources, it seems to me that it subtly modi-fies one's orientation to the others one encounters. The horizon toward which one is moving always has a somewhat mysterious, puzzle-like character; thus those whom one encounters on this journey are always potentially holding another piece of the puzzle. In short, it seemed to me that Taylor's theism engages the world in such a fashion that it satisfies the weak ontological criterion of being both fundamental and deeply con-testable.[12]

In sum, my engagement with Taylor provided me with two crucial insights. First, I found his understanding of the agent's relation to her ontological sources to be appro-priate to the kind of things I wanted to say about weak ontology. And, second, by offer-ing an example of theism that is compatible with weak ontology, Taylor let me see that the standard notions of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism are, by themselves, less useful that I had originally thought.

By this point in my philosophical evolution, I also thought that I could specify more clearly what weak ontology involves and what can make it more, rather than less, "felici-tous."[13] Weak ontology is concerned with the constitution of, and reflection upon, the

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11 Taylor, chapter three.

12 In a very provocative book, Patchen Markell has recently suggested that Taylor's project is more danger-ous than I suggest here. He argues that a submerged figure of sovereignty exists in Taylor's future horizon in which, Markell contends, all identities are accorded full—and sovereign—recognition by all others. Such a vision "ultimately denies" Taylor's own engagement with the finitude of human being. Although Markell here identifies an important tension, his failure to take the matter of inarticulacy of sources more seriously makes that tension seem more fatal to Taylor's project than I think it really is; see *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton University Press, 2003) chapters one and two, especially 56–61.

13 Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) "Introduction."

basic figures or portrayals that animate our thought and action. Our figurations of self, other, and the beyond-human are never purely cognitive matters; rather they are also always aesthetic-affective. Wittgenstein captures something of this curious sense of basic "beliefs" when he says: "It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence although it's a belief, it's really a way of living; or a way of assessing life."[14]

A "felicitous" ontology would be one that offered a figuration of human being in terms of at least four existential realities or universals: language, mortality or finitude, natality or the capacity for radical novelty, and the articulation of some ultimate background source. A weak ontologist recognizes that these dimensions are universal in the sense that they are constitutive of human being, but she also recognizes that no one set of figurations can claim universal, self-evident truth.[15] Felicitousness will also be partially dependent upon how well an adherent elucidates the way these ontological figures pre-figure ethical-political perceptions and judgments. I use this curious term "*pre*-figure" to create some distance from any notion that one can, with certainty, deduce specific ethical-political claims from a weak ontology. There is no such royal road. But the figures of a weak ontology do provide rough cognitive and affective orientation; they structure our perception of what is more or less significant in the ethical-political world and help to motivate us accordingly. The figures of an ontology draw us to "see-feel," to borrow a term from Taylor, the world in one way rather than another.[16] In sum, one does not so much derive principles as elicit an ethos from ontological figures.

With these distinctions in hand, I felt I had a critical basis for judging how well a particular thinker was acquitting herself in terms of the relation between ontological "foundations" and specific ethical-political claims. Accordingly, I turned the criteria of felicitousness back upon Connolly and Taylor, from whom I had drawn so much initial insight. Thus, I developed, for example, a critique of Connolly on the grounds that he has insufficiently figured language within his ontology; that is, his account of being as continual, unmanageable presencing does not adequately figure language, more specifically the unavoidably arresting quality of human utterance.[17] One upshot of this is a relative indifference to the human-nonhuman distinction, something that can have some unsettling ethical-political implications. Connolly (and many others) would no doubt respond that there are strong reasons today to look for ways to blur

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[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1980 edition) 64–64e.

[15] Weak ontology can't entirely foreclose the possibility that there will be a convergence upon one set of figurations.

[16] Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 70.

[17] William Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1993) 10–14. Cf. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 130–1; and Stephen K. White, "After Critique: Affirming Subjectivity in Contemporary Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* (April 2003): 224–5.

this distinction. There is much to be said for such concerns, but I would argue that we do best to think here in terms of alternately blurring and un-blurring such a distinction. And to negotiate that task well, we need a better accounting of language than Connolly gives us.

Similarly, in Taylor's work I could now perceive a shortcoming that emerges when he moves from ontology to ethical-political commitments. The problem is not in drawing out the prefigurations of his own ontology, but rather in the sharp critique he launches of Foucaultian ontologies and others that figure mortality against the background of an external, amoral source, rather than a moral one.[18] From a figuration of mortality aligned only with amoral sources, Taylor argues, we get an inevitable prefiguration of violence. But the connection between ontological figure and a political value like violence is never that certain, as I have said. Accordingly, Taylor's categorical critique of amoral ontological sources is no more convincing than the almost mirror-like critique made of theistic ontologies: namely, that they inevitably prefigure the intolerance and oppression of non-believers.[19]

From what I have said so far, it should be quite clear that Connolly and Taylor were relatively easy suspects to round up for my project. They both freely and explicitly have recourse to the terrain of ontology. The same is not true of the other two thinkers, Kateb and Butler. They manifest, in different ways, a degree of reticence toward thinking in an affirmative sense about one's ontological commitments. My engagement with them thus had a more explicitly critical edge to it because my intention was to expose the crucial ontological machinery that I thought I could see very much in operation in their work. This effort might appear to bear something of the character of an unmasking. But, ultimately, I don't really see things that way. While the gesture of unmasking in political theory often implies a claim of fraudulence, my effort carried more the sense of a challenge to them to draw out and affirm more explicitly the weak ontology that already animates their work.

Kateb was of interest to me because he stands squarely in the domain of liberalism, and yet he is deeply worried that if it is cashed out only in terms of the claims of "political liberalism" or in terms of a perfectionism oriented solely around the bare value of individual autonomy, then it will not be as attractive as it should be. Ultimately, I think Kateb would say of ontologies what Edmund Burke said of countries: to make us love

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[18] Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity," *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and "The Imminent Counter-Enlightenment," paper presented to Castelgandolfo Colloquim VII, August, 1996. In comments at the conference, "The Bearable Lightness of Being: Weak Ontology and the Affirmation of Moral and Political Life," Northwestern University, March 2004, Taylor backed away from his earlier claim that an appeal to amoral sources somehow entails a slide toward violence.

[19] White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 67–69.

them, they "ought to be lovely."[20] But Kateb is clearly somewhat conflicted about his own undertaking, which might best be described as an ontology and ethos of what he calls "democratic individuality."[21] At times, he comments that the Rawlsian framework is perfectly satisfactory as it stands, and yet he also sees his efforts as providing a needed "renovation of liberalism."[22] The portrait of individuality that Kateb paints is quite remarkable. His ontology of "connectedness," as he calls it, animates an ethos of "democratic aestheticism," by which he means a sort of Whitmanesque receptivity to all that we encounter. This willful seeing of all that surrounds us as beautiful has an austerely heroic quality to it, especially when one realizes that Kateb's nonfoundationalism exhibits a truly foundational certainty as to the worthlessness of theistic perspectives. As Kateb knows, the "Emersonian tradition"—Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—ultimately relied upon some sort of theism to guarantee that all

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particulars in the world have a meaningful place in a transcendent scheme of reconciliation.[23] Kateb's ontology allows no such strong, sustaining hope, but he does try nevertheless to prefigure an individual who boldly cultivates the imagination and exercises the will to see the world in an almost Christ-like fashion. As Kateb says, we should exercise "aesthetic charity" generously, thereby mimicking the Christian God who indiscriminately "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."[24]

Thus, my engagement with Kateb taught me that there is no reason liberals can't have richer ontologies than has often been the case in the past. Although Kateb is quite reticent about the effect his renovation efforts might have on liberal political reflection, it seems clear to me that a Katebian individual will aim at "living the…structures" of liberal democracy in more admirable ways than the possessive individual or the autonomous individual.[25]

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[20] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1987) 68.

[21] George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 25–35, 96–97.

[22] George Kateb, "Democratic Individuality and the Meaning of Rights," *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 186, 190; and *The Inner Ocean*, 80.

[23] Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 30, 245; and *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995) 64–5, 92.

[24] George Kateb, "Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility," *Political Theory* (February 2000): 34, paraphrasing Matthew 5:45.

[25] This is Taylor's phrase in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) xii.

Let me turn now to Judith Butler's work. Of all of the suspects I rounded up, she has been the one most suspicious of ontological claims. She has argued repeatedly that the recourse to an ontological level has typically had the effect of making basic commitments appear to be natural, uncontestable features of human being and the world. Butler has always been eager to make trouble for any thinking that displays such characteristics because it invariably operates in ways that occlude the workings of power. This distancing move away from traditional ontology is not joined, however, with a total renunciation of ontology. Foundations, she argues, are "indispensable" but "contingent."[26]

My engagement with Butler induced me to draw a distinction between having a weak ontology and having a "thin" one. The latter term seems to me to be appropriate for those who contest traditional foundationalism and yet admit that some sort of basic figures and commitments animate all types of ethical-political discourse. For a thin ontologist, all that is necessary is to make this methodological admission and affirm that such basic figures and commitments are essentially contestable. To oversimplify a good bit, a thin ontologist wants to make this quick admission and then turn immediately back to the activity of critiquing strong foundationalists and engaging in reflection on more immediate political questions. From my point of view, for a thin ontologist to become a weak one, she must take on more systematically the tasks involved with carefully elaborating one's ontology. This includes both articulating it enough that it offers coherent figurations of the four existential realities—language, mortality or finitude, natality, and the articulation of some ultimate background source—and clarifying how those figures pre-figure the particular ethical-political positions that one affirms.

I initially categorized Butler as a thin ontologist on the basis of her reluctance to flesh out her ontology. As I worked through *The Psychic Life of Power*, however, I began to see increasing evidence of a turning toward those more extensive labors to which the weak ontologist feels obligated. This is especially true in regard to how finitude is figured in Butler's notion of constitutive loss and to how an account of critical agency begins to get more fully prefigured in that book.[27]

Hopefully, this brief genealogy provides a better sense of the thicket of issues surrounding weak ontology, as well as of the ways in which Connolly, Taylor, Kateb, and Butler have helped me better understand the dimensions of that thicket and begin to find my way around in it.

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[26] Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, and N. Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995) 133.

[27] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Critical Issues

I want to try now to achieve a bit more clarity about the character of ontological sources. I will do this by working through two contrasts: moral versus amoral and chosen versus unchosen. As this elucidation proceeds, it will also open up some of the more important ethical-political questions that I think a weak ontological turn helps us to engage more thoughtfully.

Moral Versus Amoral Sources

I refer to ontological sources, rather than to "moral sources" as Taylor does, because, as I indicated earlier, I think that amoral sources can have a weak ontological character. Let me be clearer about what I mean here. For Taylor, the preeminent moral value that the Christian ontology carries is *agapê*.[28] For a Christian, that is to be the structuring value in life. Contrast this with, say, Connolly's amoral source: the world as simply unbidden, unmanageable presencing or becoming. Such a world comes with no clear moral slant. One's figurative efforts must find a way to respond coherently to this character of things. There are certainly reasons to draw upon, although none have conclusive force. For example, you may decide that one reason that the world has come to have this character for you is a growing recognition that your attempts to see the world in foundationalist terms have been continually beset by nagging doubts or events that don't fit the pre-scribed order. You might then begin to sense that what initially felt like an unmanageable confusion you had earnestly sought to peer *through*—toward some strong foundation—is in fact all there is. That is what you respond to. In time, you might come to terms with this and begin to experience this unmanageable presencing as an overflowing of being, a generosity of being, in something like the sense in which Heidegger spoke of the "*Es gibt*" of being.[29] In turn, you might find it fitting to respond to this originary experience of the world with an ethic of generosity, such as the one Connolly calls "critical responsiveness" or the one Butler appeals to when she speaks of "fundamentally more capacious, gener-ous, and 'unthreatened' bearings of the self."[30] Such an ethic is a kind of responding to, bearing witness to, or doing justice to an ontology of unmanageable presencing.

Chosen Versus Unchosen Sources

Turning to the second contrast, chosen versus unchosen sources, I think Taylor is cor-rect in arguing that we are embedded in our ontological sources in a way that is mis-characterized when they are recast in liberal terms as things chosen by a "disengaged self."[31] Let me try to state what this claim amounts to for my purposes.

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[28] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 410–12, 516.

[29] See *Sustaining Affirmation*, 109–10.

[30] William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) xv–xix; and 178–88; Butler, "For a Careful Reading," 140.

[31] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 21.

The liberal position, taken in its strongest sense, would simply state that individual autonomy is the core value of moral and political life. The capacity to survey, to frame, to choose, and to overcome any previous choice is what is magnificently distinctive about us, what raises us up out of nature. Recently, liberals have done much better in coming to understand that the very coherence of the value of autonomy depends upon some cultural context that provides a framework of intelligibility, in the sense that it is only within such a context that specific choices have some meaning.[32] Despite this advance, it remains the case that what is provided by culture is conceived in what are essentially instrumental terms. My having an integral "societal culture," to use Will Kymlicka's term, is finally important simply because it is necessary for my autonomy to "boot up," as it were, successfully.[33] Once we are booted up—have our meaning rules— the continually operative character of our autonomous agency is perfectly understandable without continual reference to the background of meaning.

This more sophisticated picture of the autonomous self of liberalism nevertheless remains problematic when viewed from the perspective of weak ontology. When one takes seriously the notion of ontological sources, it means that inarticulacy and incompleteness are seen as being continually operative constituents of human agency. Our capacity for autonomy is always running up against this or, perhaps more starkly, is always "subject to" this condition. I use the latter phrase deliberately, precisely because it evokes the deepest fears of the modern liberal tradition. My aim here is not to be provocative, but rather precisely to signal that I don't take these concerns lightly. And yet I am also convinced that it is only through some better figuration of this quality of human being that weak ontologists will begin to be able to prefigure more persuasive answers to "foundational" questions. Let me try to illustrate the sort of thing I have in mind here by considering one such question that is today being pressed upon us quite insistently.

Weak Ontology and Human Rights

One way in which late modernity is often characterized is as a time in which the fundamental notions of Western modernity have lost their self-certainty. In the emerging discourse of globalization, the idea of the nation state, for example, is rendered problematic in a number of ways. But there is at least one set of fundamentals that seems to be bucking this trend. Here I mean the idea of human rights, with something like an image of humanity hovering somehow behind, under, or beyond it. It is as if our ethical-political hopes and practices are increasingly attracted, by the implicitly gravitational force of our own language use, to this anchorage precisely as other fundaments

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[32] See, for example, Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 7–8 and chapter five.

[33] Kymlicka 7–8 and chapter five.

lose their holding capacity. The concepts of human rights and humanity just seem to be functionally necessary moral intimations of our discourse of globalization. The problem, however, is that such functional necessity does not entail that these concepts are actually explicable in any satisfactory manner. And, indeed, that is precisely the problem for mainstream political theory: the more one thinks about such concepts, the less clear one becomes about them. Let me try to explain, first, why I think this is the case and, then, why weak ontological reflection may be of use here. It seems to me that the notions of human rights and humanity have to draw their sustenance from a figuration of human being that gives sense to our ideas of human dignity, basic equality, and respect. It is only when this trinity of concepts has some cogency that we can, in turn, see why we might be creatures that share the sort of connectedness and commonality that gives distinctive force to the idea of humanity and makes us out to be creatures peculiarly worthy of rights.[34]

The liberal animates this entire conceptual array through a figuration of the human capacity for autonomy. Each individual equally has such a potential, and the majesty of this unique capacity induces a sense of awe unlike that induced by any other natural creature. Here we have a figuration of natality and a sense of sublimity that in turn provide a potential source for an affirmation of human dignity and of the equal respect we owe one another. But I think that this source provides an inadequate basis for such affirmation.

My claim is not that there is something bad about autonomy. To the contrary, it is essential to any moral and political theory I would find worthy of affirmation. My point is only that, in relation to the problem at hand, autonomy has a one-sided quality. It can, and certainly does, play a significant role in sustaining a rough sense that I should respect the other, a disposition to be understood as *a propensity to back off* from this marvelous creature and its projects. But I am less convinced that it can sustain the sort of *attentiveness and affect* that could in turn nourish that slender and elusive sense of connectedness and responsiveness that seem to me to be necessary if we are to have any hope of bringing our motivations up to a level commensurate with the emphasis that our discourses of globalization are always already placing squarely onto our practical agenda today.

An emphasis on autonomy alone—at least within the context of all our modern engines of social and scientific progress—leaves our figuration of human being without sufficient sources to retard a drift toward self-images of infinitude. Burke, with some hyperbole, found such a self-image to be in a reciprocally enhancing relationship with what he once called a "false sublime," that is, one evoked by a sense of human being as

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34 I take up these questions in more detail in "Uncertain Constellations: Dignity, Equality, Respect and …?," *The New Pluralism*, ed. Morton Schoolmon and David Campbell (forthcoming).

entirely unbounded potential and self-overcoming.[35] When we carry such a self-image, we are less likely to display an everyday ethos of attentiveness and responsiveness to others who are not already obtrusive claimants for our attention to begin with. Within healthy liberal democracies, many of our "others" can find some sort of access to public spaces and media within which they stand a good chance of gaining some obtrusiveness as claimants on our consciousness.[36] And in this obtrusive disclosure, they gain that status in the face of which autonomous creatures will feel the imperative to back off, to accord respect. But in a global context, our "others" often don't have this relatively easy obtrusiveness. If this is true, then the constellation of dignity, equality, and respect will—when prefigured primarily by the figure of autonomy—often find itself implicitly generating an incapacity to see-feel in ways that might more robustly animate enactments of human rights and humanity, as opposed to pronouncements.

At this point, I suspect that some readers will already be finding my line of thought to be coming rather close to one particularly vivid charge in Taylor's broad indictment of the disengaged, autonomous self that appears at the very end of *Sources of the Self*. There he contends that the ethical-political pronouncements of our modern liberal selves involve quite high, universal standards of justice and benevolence, but that our disengaged understanding of human agency leaves us with no moral sources adequate to sustain the robust enactment of those standards. In short, "high standards need strong sources" (I don't interpret strength in this sense as equating to strong ontology).[37] I do indeed think that Taylor is on to something of real significance here. Moreover, the force of this insight is also emerging among political theorists who do not share Taylor's theism.

Consider here Jeremy Waldron's recent book on Locke. Reversing his own earlier claims about that thinker, Waldron now says that we cannot simply jettison Locke's theological arguments and hang onto his claims about basic human dignity and equality; if we do so, then these claims cannot be persuasively supported.[38] Waldron's point, as I read him, is not to assert that it is impossible to generate an adequate account of dignity and equality without theological sources, but rather to inform liberals that their existing accounts are not in as robust shape as we tend to think.[39]

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35 This phrase appears in an anonymous letter that has been attributed to Burke. See my *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994) 81, note 52. Even if this attribution were to turn out to be incorrect, it is reasonable to associate this concept with Burke. In short, even if he did not have the term, I would contend that he clearly had the concept. On this distinction, see James Farr, "Social Capital: A Conceptual History," *Political Theory* (Feb. 2004): 9–10.

36 Connolly finds that even in pluralist societies, new social movements in the state of "becoming" may have substantial difficulty in getting across the threshold of recognition; see *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 178–88.

37 Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 516–18.

38 Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

39 Kateb displays a curious reluctance, in *The Inner Ocean*, to say much about the core value he affirms, "human dignity." With his characteristic honesty, he announces this silence rather than hiding it.

I thus agree with the basic thrust of Taylor's problematization of the autonomous, disengaged self; I would merely add that the difficulties seem destined to become increasingly acute as the processes and discourses of globalization unfold. But, of course, the statement of this charge from a non-theistic, weak ontological position like my own is really only the beginning of a text, not, as in Taylor's case, the end. His theistic weak ontology looks rather attractive in terms of animating a determined commitment to human rights and humanity, even if the particular form that attractiveness takes may have its own dangers, as I suggested earlier. Where, however, might the non-theistic weak ontologist look for a comparable animation?

One possible answer takes us back to the notion of being "subject to." If the theist is subject to the will of God in some sense, the non-theist is subject only to the condition of finitude. How might one construct human being as finitude in a fashion that could compete with Taylor's sources? I think I can discern a first step in this process, as well as how it might provide the kind of animation that I have suggested is necessary for a more convincing attachment to human rights and humanity than liberalism provides. As for the figuration, the central point would be to give sense to subjectedness by a certain vivification of finitude. By vivification, I mean a kind of persistent awareness of our finitude. And for this purpose, Taylor's portrait of agency is crucial. What is distinctive is the combination of understanding speech and action as continually expressing our ontological sources, and yet construing this activity as always partial and indeterminate, laden with inarticulacy. It is out of a greater attentiveness to this constitutive feature of human being that we might more effectively vivify our finitude—not as a jolting awareness of mortality, but rather as a quiet, but forever foreign, moment in everyday life.[40]

Allow me, for the sake of argument, to think I could make such a figuration persuasive. How, then, might this figure of human being elicit a more promising attachment to humanity and human rights—more promising than the liberal one but less confident than the theistic? The slight but significant edge that this figure has over the liberal one, focused around the capacity for autonomy, has to do with the greater propensity we have to feel and imagine the rudiments of connectedness through an *experience* of common *subjection* rather than through the recognition that we each *possess* the same *power or capacity*. A potential sense of common humanity, of solidarity, has a greater chance to thrive in the former experiential context than in the latter.[41] The vivification of a sense of shared constitutive burden, in short, has greater promise than the vivification of a shared possession of power when it comes to motivating oneself to see-feel that slenderest, initial bond of commonality across large geographic and cultural distances.

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[40] See my *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, chapters four and five.

[41] I have only recently come to understand this. In *Sustaining Affirmation*, I argued that the quality of human dignity was best figured around our *capacity* for language (see 131). I would certainly want to retain that argument to some degree in how I construe the constellation of dignity, equality, and respect, but I now realize it cannot do the sort of work I originally thought it could.