

# The transcendentalness of the moral order

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## 1. Introduction

For naturalist extremists there are no universal moral claims. They see all such claims as fiction forced upon us by culture, which means that all that remains for us to do is to deconstruct the moral universality. It is, however, important to notice that some doubt lingers, sometimes consciously but mainly unwittingly, in the minds of naturalists whether there is indeed nothing universal about morality.

This return of a universal side to morality gets a further nuance if the existential question is added; that is, whether engagement with this order is possible. Once again, some naturalists agree that life will be unbearable if contact with a broader meaning is impossible.

I shall do a transcendental investigation of the universality of the moral side of human morality. According to well-known Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, the transcendental method starts with some observation or experience that seems indubitable. From this observation, the argument moves to a “stronger” conclusion about the nature of the subject or its position in the world. It is then, in a reversed way, argued that this stronger conclusion is the condition that makes the indubitableness of the initial observation possible.

The observation in question here is the lingering moral universality in the naturalist mind. The stronger conclusion, and thus transcendental condition, I want to get to, will be that of a transcendental dimension for morality; that is, a dimension of universals valid for our moral practice.

I shall scrutinize Taylor’s own thinking about the nature of universality in morality and try to develop three theses about his moral thinking. I shall indicate, firstly, that his critique of and alternative for the current denial of universality can indeed be used to get to the transcendental side of morality. I shall thus also explore what this transcendentalness implies and should imply. I shall secondly argue that it is possible to make even stronger transcendental conclusions than the ones Taylor hints at. I shall point out, in the third place, that the transcendental side of morality contributes in a crucial way to our engagement with moral obligations. Here too I will argue that this is a somewhat neglected perspective in Taylor’s thinking.

## 2. Inescapability of moral universality

Pluralists argue that there is no moral framework shared by everyone and that this indicates that all frameworks are pure illusion because they are merely the projection of debased interests and desires. Postmodernists excel in deconstructing the latter kind of motives. They then claim not to be motivated by any such motives themselves.

Taylor however argues that both postmodern pluralists and modern naturalists are not as free from moral goods as they think. In fact, modern goods enable them to criticise and disengage from the universal side of morality. The two motives Taylor has in mind are that of equality and self-creative freedom.

Equality means that no 'higher' distinctions can be made; all there is, is a pluralism of goods, all of them relativised by equality. However, the fact that pluralists fail to proceed without the help of some universal motive can be developed into the stronger claim that universal moral motives are inescapable. To this can be added that pluralists are blind for the possibility that goods are not necessarily 'higher'. Goods can also be seen to belong to a distinguishable but equal dimension of creation. As I will argue below, the lack of this insight is also one of the weak points in Taylor's own moral ontology.

Radical self-creative freedom brings about a self who disengages from any given good. This disengagement however, is the cause of moral impotence, says Taylor, because we cannot make moral evaluations if we are not embedded within a horizon of at least culturally bound goods. As is the case with equality, Taylor's observation, that even those who deny universality are driven by it, should lead us to the transcendental deduction that universal motives like freedom and creativity is an inescapable part of our moral lives.

## 3. Morality as a coherent plurality

The existence of a conflicting pluralism causes some to conclude that the multitude of goods must be ignored or suppressed in order to lessen the conflict. Reduction, for instance, seems justified when we are confronted with ostensibly suspect goods like nationalism and communitarianism. Taylor however, thinks it is wrong to resort to reduction even in these cases.

He thinks these ideas can be saved if the non-reductionist strategy of articulation can be employed. If benign forms of goods are articulated, these benign manifestations 'start to exist for us', which means we engage with them.

In order to deal with the pluralism this broad acknowledgement of goods creates, Taylor wants to combine all goods in a *teleion agathon* like Aristotle. Taylor does not want

to see this *teleion agathon* as a single highest good from where all the others can be evaluated, but as the totality of the good.

Critics, however, think that Taylor's search for harmony will necessarily guide him to a metaphysical highest good. It is nevertheless significant that these critics are themselves stuck in the tendency to exalt a single good in order to create some form of meaning in the chaos of pluralism. The transcendental principle to be drawn from the latter observation is the necessity nature for our moral motives to portray coherence within the plurality.

Taylor is accused of making God the supreme good. Taylor gives the ambiguous answer that this is not his intention and that he merely sees God as the most eminent of all goods. With this answer, he does not address the issue of the complete otherness of God - by making Him a good amongst other goods the danger of not differentiating between God and His creation arises.

It is, notwithstanding these tensions, clear that we will have to see the coherence, besides the plurality and equality of goods, as important. The challenge to Taylor (and ourselves) is to envision this coherence without postulating a single and metaphysical reality that incorporates all universality.

#### **4. The 'naturalness' of the moral order**

Taylor calls especially modernist moral thinkers proceduralists. Proceduralists, he says, ignore the substantive point behind moral obligations and concern themselves with only the moral obligations. Taylor seems to say that proceduralists emphasise the thinking procedures to reach the obligations to such an extent that the substantive conditions for them to exist fade in the background.

Taylor furthermore accuses proceduralism of promoting only the self-creative human subject as source for morality, which means that the self becomes disengaged from any given good.

In his alternative, Taylor identifies what he calls "hyper-" or "higher" goods as the constitutors of our moral reactions. Hypergoods are for instance the human traits that give a person rights over against other human beings. One can thus argue that hypergoods constitute a context for what good action is.

Proceduralists however, are usually afraid that the idea of goods is based on metaphysical illusions. One could indeed agree with them that moral universals should not be alien projections that are added onto an otherwise self-sufficient creature.

Although Taylor's metaphor of "higher" or "hyper" does not intend to see goods as entities outside creation and thus projected from this metaphysical world onto our moral

functioning, the idea of “higher” can cause some confusion in this regard. By giving the transcendental “stronger” step, we should emphasise that goods should be seen as part of *this world*; as a dimension of creation that gives to particular actions and entities a context and identity and in this way direction to their existence. I too find it difficult to think in terms other than the spatial metaphor about this dimension - the term “dimension” has after all a spatial ring to it. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think of this dimension as before, beyond, inside or even after the particularities they are valid for.

## **5. The broadness and narrowness of the moral order**

Taylor has a broad view of ethics, which defines goods as the sense that some action, mode of life, or mode of feeling gives the context for obligations. A narrow ethics, he suggests, makes only room for moral obligations without these obligations being contextualised by goods.

We need however a more fine-tuned distinction here. Taylor is correct about the existence of a broader context; moral universality is for instance not simply the command that you should not kill another person. Universality is also about a context or motivation for this command - motivations like ‘it is a command of God’, or ‘it is necessitated because we are dealing with human beings and not animals’. These contextualisations can be called the “broad” side of moral universality. However, morality is also about the “narrow” side, which comprises of “direct” obligations like love, truth, justice, and respect. These are important because they focus in on the nature of morality as such. They are the core substance of morality and not merely the procedural residue as Taylor seems to imply.

The idea of a narrow concept that gives a core meaning to ethics, can give a more incisive perspective to another idea of Taylor about the broadness of morality. He identifies three moral dimensions instead of the usual one about respect for the lives of other people. To the latter Taylor adds the meaning of life and human dignity.

He acknowledges that morality can be only about the more narrow focus, but justifiably insists that the meaning of life and human dignity are also of such a nature that it will need a broader context or point behind it.

Taylor’s moral ontology thus needs finer tuning. However, a broader context for moral obligations is indeed important. Proceduralists argue for instance that a redistribution of wealth needs no further reference to any motivational good. Therefore, if the rich cannot see the good for this obligation they should simply be forced to share their wealth. Taylor, however, finds this idea chilling. This is also a reductionist concept that sees the respect for life as the sole concern for moral action.

In a transcendental move one can proceed to the stronger claim that morality is something that should proceed from an inner conviction and this inner conviction will only ensue if there is engagement with the broader context; that is engagement with the good.

## 6. The force of moral universality

Taylor calls this engagement, from the side of the moral subject, strong evaluation. He describes it in terms of the human ability to interpret. As such, it belongs for him to the core of being human. Interpretation, articulation, and language distinguishes us from animals according to Taylor.

Weak evaluators choose and thus radically create their values. A strong evaluator, on the other hand, experience that there are moral claims upon him or her of which the subject can feel the “pull”. Thus, although strong evaluation is a subjective undertaking, it is not a radical subjectivism. The latter is to adopt moral positions that are in no sense rooted in the nature of things.

Once again, Taylor’s critique boils down to the accusation that those in the self-creative frame of mind are not in contact with the extra-self context of goods. Granted, the weak evaluator has the ability to reflect, evaluate and will. However, the strong evaluator adds to this the very important ability to articulate the “higher desirable”.

Nevertheless, Taylor’s centring of articulation in strong evaluation, has an exigent side. He describes his distinction between the universal and its articulation with a distinction between a subjectification of mode and content. Subjectification of mode implies merely that moral ideals must resonate in the self - it must be *my* orientation.

Taylor links to this emphasis the observation that generally accepted, articulated and public goods are no longer available for us moderns. We have to articulate our goods in every case anew. This does not mean that we have to create our morality in total. It nevertheless means that we shall recognise moral universality only through its being ratified afresh in the sensibility of each new moral subject.

However, it is according to Taylor’s own description of the modern condition still possible to recognise public moral ideals like the avoidance of suffering, authenticity and liberal politics. This inconsistency probably proceeds from a degree of subjectification higher than mere subjectification of manner; a degree rooted in his emphasis on articulation. This emphasis causes the good to fade in the background in the same way that an emphasis on thinking procedures causes proceduralists to loose contact with the good.

## 7. Concluding transcendental steps

What is the nature of the universal dimension of morality? I tried to reach three objectives in my journey with Taylor. Firstly, I wanted to articulate what seems to be the transcendental arguments Taylor uses to explain morality. Secondly, I tried to add to these transcendental conclusions that seem important. These additions are mainly about the existence and nature of a transcendental zone for morality. The third goal was to point out that not only articulation but also emphasis on the substantive content of the transcendental dimension are important in our practical ethics. Let me shortly elaborate on these premises.

Taylor points out that pluralists who are sceptical about moral universality are necessarily guided in this by a universal motive namely the equality of all perspectives.

From this observation, one can take the stronger argumentative step to the idea of an *inescapable* transcendental side for our moral existence. The observation also enables the idea of the *necessary* connection with the transcendental dimension. In other words, the transcendental side and the moral existence for which it is valid, inescapably assume one another.

One can also make the observation that equality as moral motive is important because it creates room for a multitude of moral motives. In order to accommodate this plurality in a non-pluralistic way Taylor emphasises the principle of a *teleion agathon* which can rather be formulated as the transcendental condition of the coherent diversity of moral universals. In one of the unclear areas of his account, critics point out that Taylor does not explain how this coherence can be achieved in a non-metaphysical way. They are even concerned that he will make God the ultimate synthesis of goods – which, of course, will put us back in a neo-Platonic mode of thinking.

A more incisive articulation of coherence will have to make a clear distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental. Transcendental conditions do not belong to a metaphysical universe; they are not something beyond, outside or separate from the particulars for which they are valid. The transcendental can nevertheless be identified as a distinguishable dimension that harbours not only the universal conditions for a moral life, but probably also the elusive formula for a coherence of these conditions. The transcendent however, exists *before* the moral particulars because it is the source or creator of both particulars and universals. The truly transcendent is from a Christian point of view, only God. Highly suspect is the outlook that positions the transcendent somewhere inside creation - this happens for instance with the motive of radical self-creation.

Taylor's main critique of proceduralists is indeed levelled against the transcendent position they assume for the moral subject. Proceduralists project universality from within the self and in this way disengages the self from a given transcendental good. However, and this should be added to Taylor's account, projection also takes place when the home of universal moral motives is seen to be in a metaphysical world beyond and outside creation. When Taylor suggests that goods have a "higher" or "hyper"-location, he evokes memories of such a metaphysical world. I do not believe this is what Taylor wants. It is nevertheless important to get rid of the reference to "higher" and clearly state that transcendentalness does not exist in any way independent from the beings or particularities for which it is valid. The transcendental condition to be stated is that the transcendental has, so to speak, an inescapable naturalness to it.

Taylor inadvertently also leads us to, but fails to articulate, another important feature of transcendentalness. He criticises proceduralism for its lack of seeing moral obligations within the context of the wider ontological conditions that make them possible. Their narrow concept of morality leaves out the moral point behind obligations and brings narrow moralists to the brink of a fascist view when they deem it possible to simply compel people to act moral and not help them to see the good that makes sense of this obligation. Taylor should however also make room for the narrow view that focuses on moral obligations. Obligations like truth, love, justice, respect for life and so on help us to move in on the identity of the moral side of our existence. As in the event of being cut off from the broader context behind morality, we will equally be lost at sea without the narrow focus. In other words, morality needs both the broader context and the narrow focus on its identity.

The need to evade a fascist view brought me to the third objective of this paper namely the attention Taylor gives to engagement with moral goods to facilitate enthused moral action. He, quite rightly, points out that the idea of self-fabricated obligations that are projected onto a neutral situation will not have this effect. When dealing with a moral decision one must already experience the pull of contextual goods as well as direct moral obligations. The downside to this is that we will experience that our world and existence increasingly become meaningless if we look at it through the eyes of weak evaluators and proceduralists. The latter disengages from the transcendental because they focus on procedures like rational arguments to know the transcendental and let the actual content fade in the background. To Taylor, one can ask whether his emphasis on language, interpretation and articulation, not also constitute a kind of proceduralism that might divert attention from the content of the transcendental. Positively stated this condition demands that engagement with universality consists of more than mere procedure.

