A Phenomenological Defence of Radical Re-evaluation

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Introduction

The everydayness of moral judgements and beliefs makes them so pervasive that we are hardly ever wondered by them. In our time more than ever, it is common for a large number of people to speak out on the many different forms of global media about injustice.[1] And yet, it seems to become more difficult to recognise the special nature of morality. That is, as we proclaim our judgements more and more, it becomes harder to experience the wonder of their origin. Philosophy could help us. Metaethics for instance, understood as philosophical research into the nature of moral properties and their relation to beliefs and judgements, is a way of wondering about normative ethical claims. Most of the contemporary debate that identifies with this name is practiced by analytic philosophers, as is attested by the theories dealt with in the introductions to metaethics by Andrew Fisher and Steven Miller.[2] The wondering about normative ethical claims that is practiced within this debate is, however, quite different from what I wish to achieve. Their aim is to determine on what basis ethical judgements of a subject could be correct from within an already present understanding of the relation between us and the world. In contrast, wonder helps us reach the origin of morality because it lets us experience the uniqueness of there being a value rich universe in the first place. I will base my paper on Taylor's view on the moral self. It will require some work to bring to light the unarticulated metaethical position that it harbours. In doing so, I hope to provide an account that can help the contemporary metaethical debate reach a broader perspective. One which goes beyond the dry wondering about normative ethics by recovering a sense of wonder and traversing to a more original questioning.

Taylor's argumentation in favour of the responsibility of a continuous radical re-evaluation of our evaluations provides the starting point of this inquiry. Taylor presents his position in "Responsibility for Self",[3] but seems to leave out a lot of the arguments required to make his position plausible. In this chapter he denies the existence of a universally correct yardstick, on the basis of which we could determine the correctness of ethical claims. Additionally, he also holds that this implies that we have a responsibility to re-evaluate our ethical judgements. My aim is to develop the phenomenological arguments that Taylor must draw on to be able to defend this position in more detail than he does himself. Phenomenology is here understood as the method of leading our 'understanding' back from our ordinary apprehension of beings to that which makes this possible.[4] This is what I will attempt to do throughout this paper. By using the explication of Taylor's position as a waypoint, I hope to make headway towards a new perspective in the metaethical debate. This interpretation, while inspired by

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Dreyfus and Taylor's book *Retrieving Realism*, goes beyond their project.[5] The main difference is that I identify primordial attunement as the origin of the possibility of standing in a specific position within the open realm in which entities can present themselves as meaningful. What this means will become clearer as I develop the argument in more detail.

I have divided my questioning into the phenomenological arguments that Taylor requires for his position on the moral self into two subquestions. The first question is the following: *how* is Taylor able to claim that there is no universally correct yardstick to determine the correctness of our moral evaluations? The second question is: *why* does the lack of a universal yardstick imply that we have a responsibility to radically re-evaluate our evaluations? I will answer the how-question by arguing that Taylor should hold the more elaborate position that morality springs from a value rich world, which we primarily understand non-conceptually. Answering the why-question will boil down to showing how the phenomenological argumentation needed to answer the first question makes it possible to defend the idea that there is a multiplicity of valid perspectives. The responsibility for a continuous re-evaluation of our evaluations follows from the lack of a universally correct yardstick. Without such a yardstick we are unable to determine the right way of being moral. Continuous radical re-evaluation indicates a state of openness in which we are able to see reality afresh and become open to new ways of living. In this paper I will be defending these answers.

I start out, in section 1, by discussing Taylor's rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice. Proponents of this theory hold that it is up to every individual subject to determine the meaning of the world by choosing what to do. It will become clear that Taylor rejects Sartre's position because the radical choice can only be made on the basis of a more basic level of strong evaluation that it ignores. 'Strong evaluation' is a technical term that Taylor uses to describe our sensitivity to the meaningfulness of the world.[6] Once this has been established, I will discuss Taylor's claim that we have a responsibility to ourselves to radically re-evaluate our strong evaluations. At the end of the section, we will be able to grasp Taylor's position and see that he is not able to defend it adequately with the arguments he presents in his paper.

In section 2, I will focus on *how* we can enable Taylor to claim that there is no yardstick. I will do so by addressing the philosophical commitments that can be drawn from his critique of Sartre. The commitments will turn out to be: the primacy of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) and the importance of primordial attunement (*Befindlichkeit*). These are terms introduced by Heidegger through his phenomenological method, understood as the bringing back of everyday experience to its authenticity. At the end of this section, I draw on a Gibsonian account of affordances to show how perspective-relative affordances can exist without reducing their meaning to subjective experiences. I rely on Gibson to present a very clear range of phenomena that support the relation between the generality of primordial attunement and the specificity of attunement (*Stimmung*).

In section 3, I will bring the phenomenological arguments of section 2 together and discuss *why* it follows that we have a responsibility to radically re-evaluate our evaluations. Since the individual is usually bound by a limited pre-given perspective, the responsibility to radically re-evaluate one's

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[5] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[6] Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self", in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg, Topics in Philosophy ; 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

evaluations articulates our responsibility to be able to be flexible enough to re-interpret our understanding of the world. This answer to the why-question will help us see how this metaethical position moves towards a retrieval of a sense of wonder. It will help us reach an experience of the uniqueness of our position within the world.

Finally, in section 4, I go over a possible solution to the problem of an 'anything goes' morality that might be implied by this position. The problem might be formulated as follows: if there are no universally correct rules for determining the value of an action, does it not follow that every action becomes permissible? Having determined the structure of the argument in answering the why-question, I try to establish that morality flows from a shared world in which we take a perspective.

1. Taylor's rejection of Sartre as a preparatory analysis

In the previously mentioned chapter "Responsibility for Self", Taylor argues that what he calls *simple weighing* requires a more fundamental level of *strong evaluation*. Simple weighing is, according to Taylor, determining what to do by weighing the pros and cons of alternative actions.[7] It is reflectively determining which alternative is best suited to satisfy one's desires. Taylor contrasts simple weighing with strong evaluation, which he describes as deploying "a language of evaluative contrasts ranging over desires".[8] So, to decide what action one should undertake, the simple weigher would try to determine as many of the factual consequences of each alternative and their relation to her desires. In contrast, the strong evaluator uses a vocabulary that, after 'reflection' on her being drawn to one action over another, touches on the reasons why she is drawn to choose a particular alternative. By employing strong evaluative language, a moral agent is trying to describe why a specific action would fit into a life worth living. One should think of words such as 'noble', 'worthy', 'just' and 'uncivilised' as instances of the use of strong evaluative language. The point Taylor is trying to make, is that simple weighing can only be done on the basis of more the fundamental strong evaluations. We will now look into the argument Taylor provides in favour of this position.

Towards the end of the chapter, Taylor turns to an example of a moral dilemma that Sartre has put forth in *L' Existentialisme est un Humanisme* as a phenomenon in support of his theory of radical choice. In this example a young man is torn between staying home, so he can care for his sick mother, and joining the resistance to help free his country. According to Sartre, the young man is mistaken when he claims that his feelings will show him the right decision, for it is the choice that determines the meaningfulness of the action.[9] This dilemma is supposed to show that it is impossible to solely rely on values when determining which action one should perform. The boy is only able to choose one alternative over the other by making a radical choice that determines the value of the options through the choice itself. The choice is, for this reason, ultimately up to the young man. As he makes the radical choice, he determines the meaning of the options that he faced in the dilemma.

Taylor responds to Sartre in the following way:

A cruel dilemma indeed. But it is a dilemma only because the claims themselves are not created by

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[7] Taylor, 287.
[8] Taylor, 287.
[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macober (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 32.

radical choice. If they were, the grievous nature of the predicament would dissolve, for that would mean that the young man could do away with the dilemma at any moment by simply declaring one of the rival claims as dead and inoperative.[10]

According to Taylor, the problem with the theory of radical choice is that the value of the alternatives that make the choice into a dilemma becomes irrelevant if overcoming the dilemma is simply a case of choosing one action over the other. Even though Taylor does not state this, I believe that the core of the argument against Sartre must be that he mistakenly grounds all reasons for choosing in the subject. Consequently, the subject becomes the judge of the meaning and moral weight of all actions. If the subject is indeed the ultimate judge, then it becomes unfathomable how a moral dilemma could arise in the first place. An individual could just as easily dissolve the dilemma by exerting the same powers through which the dilemma came to be. This is what Taylor suggests by claiming that the boy only experiences a dilemma because the moral worth of both options was not decided by him. It is precisely because the moral value of the world is not up to the individual that such a moral dilemma can arise. On the basis of this interpretation of Sartre, Taylor concludes that the theory of radical choice veils that a moral dilemma can arise exclusively if non-subject determined strong evaluations pull us with an equally strong force. Put differently, the need for a radical choice can only arise because we are strong evaluators.

Taylor's refutation of Sartre's theory of radical choice shows how simple weighing can only be done as a derivative mode of strong evaluation. A moral dilemma arises because we are sensitive to the moral value of both options, which is a way of saying that we stand in their light. When we translate this into the distinction between simple weighing and strong evaluation, we see that simple weighing also cannot account for the need to weigh our options at all. Weighing pros and cons leaves out the strong evaluations that are the basis for valuing one action over the other. When decision making is mistakenly understood in this way, the act of evaluating alternative actions is reduced to a derivative weighing of desires and consequences. Since the meaning of these desires and consequences are then grounded in a subject, it falls victim to the same kind of subjectivism as is implied by Sartre's theory of radical choice. Strong evaluation is, however, a way of recognising the values that reveal themselves without having the subject as its cause. Herein lies the distinction between the mode of action of the subject that determines what she should do on the basis of radical choice/simple weighing, and, on the other hand, *human being* as the sensitivity to the pull of its world.

The key passage in which Taylor discusses the responsibility to radically re-evaluate our evaluations, is the following:

> If I am questioning whether smuggling a radio into the country is honest, or I am judging everything by the utilitarian criterion, then I have a yardstick, a definite yardstick. But if I go to the radical questioning, then it is not exactly that I have no yardstick, in the sense that anything goes, but rather that what takes the place of the yardstick is my deepest unstructured sense of what is important, which is as yet inchoate and which I am trying to bring to definition. I am trying to see reality afresh from more adequate categories to describe it.[11]

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[10] Taylor, "Responsibility for Self", 291.
[11] Taylor, 298.

Taylor understands radical questioning as the 'questioning' of one's strong evaluations without a definite yardstick to guide the questioning. It is, thus, the evaluation of my evaluations without the usage of a principle to determine their correctness. Taylor contrasts radical re-evaluation with a lingual case in which the use of the word 'honest' is the yardstick. If I know the rules for the usage of 'honest', then I know if the action is honest or not. The utilitarian is also bound by a predetermined yardstick, since she has accepted a specific theoretical criterium that serves this purpose. Namely, the principle that an action is good as long as it maximises wellbeing. Radical questioning, on the other hand, goes beyond the employment of a concrete yardstick and relies on a deep and unstructured sense of what is important. It is only from out of the radical questioning that we can see reality from a previously unknown perspective. Radical questioning brings us into contact with the condition of the possibility of a concrete yardstick. Radical re-evaluation is therefore not about determining principles that can help us reach such a universally correct yardstick: one that is correct for everybody. It is about seeing reality afresh and being open to the multiplicity of interpretations from which a concrete yardstick follows. What remains altogether unclear is how it follows from the fact that strong evaluations are presupposed in any kind of simple weighing that there is no universally correct yardstick. The aim of the following section is to determine *how* Taylor would be able to defend this claim. By following his argumentation discussed above, I will determine the philosophical commitments and the argument required to defend Taylor's position in more detail.

While linguistic practices and theoretical standpoints cannot form the basis of a universally correct yardstick, Taylor continues, it is not a case of 'anything goes'. Instead, *because there is no ultimately correct yardstick*, we have the responsibility to use our "deepest unstructured sense of what is important" to be open to new ways of evaluation.[12] The second question that remains unanswered is: *why*? Why does it follow from the inexistence of a universally correct yardstick that we have a responsibility to radically re-evaluate our evaluations? It is important to note that Taylor does quote Heidegger's understanding of Dasein as the being for which being is an issue.[13] This is certainly a first step, since it points to an understanding of the human being as determined by ever changing possibilities. It is, however, still a long way removed from being a convincing account of why this would lead to the responsibility to radically evaluate one's evaluation without the help of a concrete yardstick.

2. How Taylor could be able to deny the existence of a universally correct yardstick

I will now try to determine the arguments Taylor requires to defend the idea that there is no universally correct yardstick in the first place. This will be achieved by discussing the following two notions: I will first deal with the *primacy of being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*) and secondly with *primordial attunement* (*Befindlichkeit*) as the basis for significance.

Taylor's rejection of Sartre's position rests on the idea that the subject is not the origin of the significance of the world. To support this argument Taylor could draw on Heidegger's understanding of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) as the most basic level on the basis of which beings are understood. For my purposes it is most effective to briefly sketch the distinction between beings that are ready-to-

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[12] Taylor, 298.
[13] Taylor, 299.

hand (*zuhanden*) and beings that are present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) to make clear how being-in-the-world is primary and to illustrate the ontological difference.[14]

Readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) is the mode of being of beings that receive their intelligibility from our goal driven involvement with them.[15] When I am taking notes during a lecture, I do not notice my pen. I just write down the things that draw me to write them down. The pen is ready-to-hand because I transparently utilise it by drawing on my familiarity with the world. Besides this, my activity and the tools that I use during this activity can only be understood through my familiarity with the referential totality in which they have their place. That is, writing down notes with a pen is only intelligible because I am familiar with being a student. In addition, it requires that I am familiar with the tools I need as a student, such as pens, notebooks and blackboards. The significance of this referential totality, by which I mean both its meaning and importance, requires that I am working towards a certain goal. In this case, I am undertaking this activity for the sake of learning.

Even so, it could happen that, while writing down an interesting aspect of what the teacher has just said, my pen refuses to cooperate. It could be out of ink or have gotten damaged somehow. In this case, I will be pulled out of my engaged activity and I will need to investigate why my pen is no longer functioning properly before I am able to re-engage in my activity. I will need to take note of its characteristics in order to determine why it is malfunctioning and to determine possible ways of fixing it. The way of being of the pen has now gone to presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*).[16]

The structure of this simple phenomenon is a good example of most of the phenomenological arguments used throughout the first part of *Sein und Zeit*. There is a phenomenologically determined ontological level. A level arrived at by leading concrete dealings with beings back to an ontological structure that makes the dealings possible. This case illustrates how a pen can have two different modes of being, or different ways of presenting itself, namely readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand. The phenomenological description thus shows that there is more to the pen than just its properties as a being, for it also has a certain mode in which it gives itself. The pen, as a being, is what Heidegger calls the ontic level. The mode in which the pen is made intelligible is called the ontological level. This is the primary distinction between being (ontological) and beings (ontic), named by the *ontological difference (Ontologische Differenz)*.[17]

In preparation for the third section it is important to see that readiness-to-hand is the more basic level of intelligibility. Beings are firstly understood on the basis of one's familiarity with these beings grounded in the totality of interconnected meanings that give beings their significance. The example of using a pen to write down notes during a lecture is supposed to show that the significance of an activity is governed by a specific goal that is to be achieved without representing the condition of satisfaction. I call this 'care-driven involvement', for it captures both the goal driven nature of the activity, while also making clear that it is non-representational. So, the world is first and foremost understood on the basis of our care-driven involvement, expressed in its way of being as readiness-to-hand. Yet, we can also deal with objects through observation and reflection. In this stance we take beings as present-at-hand

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[14] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 11th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 69–70.
[15] Heidegger, 71.
[16] While I am aware of the intermediate phenomenon of unhandiness (*Unzuhandenheit*), I am leaving out this distinction because it might over complicate matters without bringing anything more to the table.
[17] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Johan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 4-6/6-7.

objects with properties. A natural occurrence of this phenomenon is breakdown cases that force us out of our engaged dealing. Such cases require that we put ourselves over against the world, so we can observe entities and their properties.

Now we are in a position to work towards the importance of being-in-the-world. The phenomenological account of using a pen provides an insightful example that can help us to understand this. In the lecture example, the pen is significantly present in mode of being as it is being used. What remains unanswered is the condition of the possibility of the pen showing itself in its significance. In other words, what makes being, as that on the basis of which entities are understood, possible? This leads us to the more basic question than just the way in which being makes beings intelligible. This question is described by Heidegger as an inquiry into the occurrence of being.[18]

One way of grasping the possibility of the understanding of being is through understanding what Heidegger means with his statement that our existence as being-in-the-world is the presupposition of apprehension.[19] In this statement, existence should not be understood as the existence of an extant entity. Instead, Heidegger is referring to the Latin meaning of the word 'ex-sistere', which translates to 'standing-beyond'. According to Heidegger, human beings have already stepped out beyond themselves, as being-in-the-world.[20] Consider the following passage:

> When we talk in an ontically figurative way about the *lumen naturale* in human being, we mean nothing other than the existential-ontological structure of this being, that it *is* one with the open. To say that it is "illuminated" means that it is cleared in itself as being-in-the-world, not by another being, but in such a way that it *is* itself the clearing.[21]

In this passage, Heidegger writes that, when understood according to the existential structure of *being-in-the-world*, talking of the human being as natural light means that we are one with the open space in which beings show themselves. Here Heidegger explicitly distances himself from all thinking that starts from a subject that enters into a universe of objects and gives it meaning by having subjective experiences. Since Heidegger holds that we are our world "*existingly*", being-in-the-world is rather a case of *being-the-world*.[22]

We have come to an understanding of being-in-the-world as a way of saying that we are (in) the openness in which beings receive their presence. What remains unexplained is how we are able to be affected by these beings as they present themselves in a specific way. In order to provide an answer, we need an understanding of *primordial attunement* (*Befindlichkeit*) as the ontological structure that enables us to be sensitive to the meaningful aspects of the world.[23] Let us briefly look at another passage from *Sein und Zeit* in which Heidegger characterises this:

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[18] Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 44.
[19] Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 164.
[20] Heidegger, 170.
[21] Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, 125/133. (slightly edited the translation)
[22] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 364.
[23] I use 'Befindlichkeit' here because this is the word Heidegger uses to indicate the ontological structure that makes significance possible. The fact that both 'Befindlichkeit' and 'Stimmung' get translated as 'attunement' make it slightly harder to clearly differentiate between the ontological structure and its ontic expression in the individual. For this reason, I will, from now on, use 'primordial attunement' for the ontological structure and 'attunement' for the ontic instance in individuals.

But being affected by the unserviceable, resistant, and threatening character of things at hand is ontologically possible only because being-in as such is existentially determined beforehand in such a way that what it encounters in the world can *matter* to it. This mattering to it is grounded in attunement (*Befindlichkeit*), and as attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) it has disclosed the world… The moodedness of attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) constitutes existentially the openness to the world of Da-sein.[24]

This passage provides an understanding of a structural relation between primordial attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) and attunement (*Stimmung*) as the condition of the possibility of being affected by the world. Primordial attunement is the way in which we have always already been brought before ourselves, in a specific place within the open.[25] Heidegger also calls the formal structure of attunement "affective self-finding".[26] So, as an affective self-finding, the individual finds herself in a specific place and in a specific mood and, in this manner, becomes an individual. The affective self-finding, called primordial attunement, makes possible the specific attunements *with* meaningfully present beings. It is the condition of the possibility of being attuned to the world.

The instances of attunement of the individual should be understood as a resonating with the world. To make this clearer I will briefly present Gibson's theory of *affordances*. Gibson works out his theory of affordances in *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* by providing analyses of the interaction between an animal and its environment. Even though Gibson does not position himself with regard to Heidegger's work, his theory will be able to show how attunement is intertwined with action and how it is also perspective-relative. Especially the second aspect will turn out to be important if we want to show *how* Taylor is able to claim that there is no universally correct yardstick. According to Gibson, our perception of the world consists of affordances, a pre-conceptual understanding of what a specific object or situation affords us.[27] I understand the relation between attunement and affordances as one in which being able to perceive affordances is being attuned to the significance of what is perceived.

The significance of the world is dependent on the perspective from which one perceives. When my phone rings I am drawn to pick it up. This is due to, for instance, my familiarity with the ringtone I use. When another phone rings with a different ringtone, or someone has changed mine without my knowledge, it does not afford picking-up. The situation can also alter the affordance. If my phone rings when I am in a lecture, it is more likely that my first response would be to try to stop my phone from ringing as soon as possible. This shows that the same perception, my phone ringing, can afford a different action depending on the situation. And, of course, when *my* phone rings, it usually does not afford picking-up or silencing-it-as-soon-as-possible to other individuals. Just like the culturally determined familiarity is a structural aspect of being-in-the-world, affordances are also largely structured by the cultural and social practices. Why I am drawn to stop my phone from ringing as soon as possible can only be understood when we are attuned to the norms of the culture with regard to taking part in a lecture. The same goes for the significance of all sorts of actions, situations, character

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[24] Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, 129/137.
[25] Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 135.
[26] Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 282.
[27] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1986), 119.

traits, religious practices, etc. Here perspective means more than just the physical position from which a bodily subject perceives the world. While this is certainly one dimension, it is also used to indicate the relation between meaningful presence and the sensitivity required to bring it to light.

There are two key aspects of attunement that should be kept in mind. First of all, primordial attunement makes it possible for things to matter. Secondly, because the individual is attuned to the world from a specific perspective, the same objectively present being can solicit a variety of responses. I used Gibson's account of affordances as a blueprint for a concrete phenomenon that shows that it is possible for a situation to afford a multiplicity of perspective-relative responses. His theory makes evident how attunement could be perspective-relative, without being a subjective experience. However, Gibson does not have the ontological level, indicated by primordial attunement, that is required for an experience to be had. His theory is, in that sense, only complementary.

Now that I have established what it means to say that being-in-the-world is the ontologically most basic way of being and that (primordial) attunement is the basis for significance, I have provided the arguments Taylor requires for his rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice. Before I move on, I would like to briefly discuss the similarity between the form of Taylor's and Heidegger's argumentation. In doing so it will become clear how being-in-the-world and attuned affordances fit into Taylor's position.

The structure of Taylor's argument against Sartre is identical to the structure that Heidegger uses to show the primacy of being-in-the-world. We saw that, in response to the moral dilemma Sartre uses to argue for his theory of radical choice, Taylor responded by noting that the moral dilemma is only a dilemma because there is a pull towards both alternative actions which does not originate from a subject. Now that we know how action and attunement are related, we see that the young man is drawn to perform both actions because he is attuned to the morally relevant aspects of each alternative action. They matter to him and draw him in, not because he has determined their meaning by exerting his own will, but because he is sensitive to their significance. Articulating this pull by using specific language is what Taylor calls strong evaluation. The need for a radical choice shows that we normally lucidly respond to the affordances of the situation. Furthermore, the brief analysis of being-in-the-world showed that we are primarily dealing with the world in an unreflective way that only collapses when something breaks down (or if we deliberately thematise the world). The young man's inability to rely on his attuned grasp of the world is a kind of breakdown. Because of the breakdown, he resorts to a simple weighing of the objective consequences of both actions without taking account of the strong evaluations that turn it into a dilemma. It is like determining the objective features of the pen in order to repair it. The action can only be performed on the basis of a more basic familiarity with the world, but, at the same time, loses sight of this 'fact'.

3. Why do we have a responsibility to re-evaluate our evaluations?

In the previous section I have provided the phenomenological arguments required to show *how* Taylor is able to support his rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice. I have argued that he needs an understanding of being-in-the-world to maintain that we are not the origin of the meaningfulness of the world. This requires a Heideggerian account of (primordial) attunement to explain the embeddedness of the individual within a shared open realm. I paired this with an understanding of a

Gibsonian account of affordances to make evident how a limited amount of meaningful aspects is experienced from a perspective, without turning them into subjective experiences. With the help of these arguments, I will now determine *why* it should follow that there is no universally correct yardstick.

The key to understanding Taylor's rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice is seeing that it is a rejection of the idea that the meaningfulness of the world is grounded in a subject. If it were solely up to the will of a subject, there would be no dilemma. A further development and clarification of this claim requires that we combine being-in-the-world and (primordial) attunement. Combining these enables us to claim that strong evaluations *are* articulations of attunement, of significance. For instance, when I use strong evaluative language to articulate why I always cycle to my part-time job, I formulate how this way of living my life is more worthy than one in which I do not care about the effects of my actions on the environment. As soon as the condition of the possibility of the existence of meaningful presence transcends the subject-object distinction, meaning is wrested from the subject and brought into the open. Strong evaluation should, therefore, be understood as an articulation of the significance of the world.

It is an important aspect of the referential totality, in which practices and beings form the basis of the intelligibility of the world, that it is not constituted by the will of individuals. Consider the meaningful sphere of educational practices. Very early in our lives we enter into the educational system, become students, have teachers, use different kinds of equipment and perform these tasks for a specific purpose. These education practices have existed and have had their meaning before an individual enters into them. In this sense, the pen that I use to write down notes during a lecture is granted to me. Not because I received the object from someone else, but because it can be meaningfully present to me only by entering into a referential totality.

It is certainly true that a specific configuration of this whole can shift. Practices can change. Using a pen to write down notes is not as common as thirty years ago. Today different equipment, such as laptops and tablets, has taken its place and has received meaningful presence within this sphere of intelligibility. Changes of this kind are changes of relations within a referential totality that are tightly connected with human behaviour. What remains unchanged is that the referential totality is required to grant meaning to the world of educational practices.

This also goes for our attunement to morally relevant aspects of situations. I have already established that strong evaluations are not constituted by subjectivity, understood in the traditional sense. Strong evaluation, understood on the basis of my interpretation of (primordial) attunement, is the recognition of a meaningful aspect of the world. Recognising a meaningful aspect makes it possible to bring it into the open, out of the hidden richness of the world. This means that we are neither the source of meaningful presence nor the source of its significance. When Taylor employs the word 'yardstick', I want to think of it as one instance of a possible organisation of background practices that ground our understanding of the world. A specific structuring of the referential totality is an instance of an 'implicit' yardstick that lets us make strong evaluations. We can articulate the strong evaluations embedded in our culture, or specific practices, because they structure our relation to the world on a more basic level than the objective world consisting of objects with properties.

While the background is the invisible enabling condition of our understanding of the world, it does not immediately follow that it is inarticulable. If the background is like the illumination in the room, in

that it allows us to see the objects in the room without seeing the light itself, then this does not mean that it is impossible to turn our attention to it. One can argue that this also goes for the moral background that structures our relation to this aspect of the world. If strong evaluations are indeed an expression of worldly significance, then they are, in some sense, expressions of the background on the basis of which the world offers itself in a certain way. Moral dilemmas are interesting cases in which it suddenly becomes important why we choose one action over another. It forces one to become clear about the worthiness of what the dilemma is about. Reckoning with such questions is already a way of trying to formulate the background of intelligibility on the basis of which the worthiness presents itself.

Now we are in a position to say clearly *why* there would be a responsibility to radically re-evaluate one's evaluations. If the individual is first and foremost in a world that is full of meaning, then the only yardstick available is the one present within the practices. However, if strong evaluations are articulations of attunements which can only occur on a background of intelligibility, then there is no way of determining whether any yardstick is ultimately correct. Because we have already established that being-in-the-world is the origin of intelligibility, we have to conclude that there are no principles that are not first drawn from the understanding grounded in being-in-the-world. Correctness can thus only exist within a pre-given background on the basis of which beings present themselves in a certain way. This does not mean that we should take everything for granted. We do not want to say that it would have been fine to continue with slavery practices, simply because there is no universally correct yardstick that we can use to show how it is objectively wrong to do so. Instead, and this is *why* Taylor calls upon us to radically re-evaluate our evaluations, we need to be open to new ways of evaluation, precisely so that we can go beyond the pre-established yardstick expressed in the background for our practices. The responsibility for radical re-evaluation is an indication of the need for an openness to new ways of living, which specifically follows from the fact that there is no universally right way of doing things.

This is a retrieval of wonder. When we see the wonder of intelligibility and accept our dependence on it, we become one with who we are. We come to stand in the realm in which the world is able to show itself, not as unbending subjects, but as beings who are sensitive enough to recognise what they owe thanks to. Once we recognise the finitude of our understanding, we are able to overcome established practices and 'see reality afresh'.

4. Against an 'anything goes' morality

In the following paragraphs I will develop a strategy for showing how Taylor's position does not necessarily imply an 'anything goes' morality. This requires that we stress that the subject is not the source of the meaning of the world. While discussing Gibson's theory of affordances, I noted that affordances are always experienced *from a perspective*. The same goes for attunement, meaningfulness can only matter to an individual if it originates from within the open. Both positions see that meaning is intimately connected with the way a group or an individual interacts with the world, without reducing it to mere subjective experience. Using a pen to write down notes brings out a meaningful dimension of the pen that only exists through the interaction between the pen and its utilisation by an individual.

The basic idea is sketched by Merleau-Ponty when he gives a phenomenological account of gazing across a landscape with a friend. Merleau-Ponty writes that at no moment he feels that he is a captive of his own private world and that, when his friend points at a church in the distance, he does not point to

"the church for him", but points to the church out there to which they are both open.[28] It is surely the case that they both experience the church from a different perspective, however, the phenomenon is used to make evident that they both experience the *same* church from a perspective. When combined with the argumentation in section 2, this example points to our always already being (in) the world, or the open. Affective self-finding brings us into a shared world and makes it possible to be attuned to the world from a perspective.

The next step is to explain, using this basic idea that we all experience the same world from a perspective, how it is possible that individuals have different strong evaluations of the same situation, without reducing strong evaluations to arbitrary subjective experiences. I will propose that we are attuned to *genuine* aspects of a shared situations, from a perspective.

Think of a spectacular summer's day on which everyone is going out for a drink, meeting new people and having a wonderful time. While the overall shared mood is happy and outgoing, I could be sullenly walking through town. Suppose that this is caused by the smokers throwing their cigarettes on the ground. Additionally, I see one of my friends, who has money problems, having a drink while he cannot afford it. My specific perspectival attunement is not attuned to the shared happy and outgoing mood, but my 'experience' of the situation is not the product of a subjective filter that colours the situation either. Instead, I am attuned to *genuine* aspects of the shared situation. The point of this example is to show that it is possible for different people to be in touch with different aspects of the same situation, without making the value of the situation rely solely on the subject. 'Genuine' does not mean that a subject has a representation that corresponds to an aspect of a situation. It is rather a way of saying that the world is experienced directly but gives itself partially. It *is* worrisome that a friend is drinking who cannot actually afford it and it *is* enjoyable to be drinking with friends on a hot summer's day. Such claims can only be made because our specific relation to the world discloses these aspects. Since we are attuned beings, that always find themselves in a specific situation and in a specific mood, the world always offers itself in a specific way. A situation can afford different valuations without contradicting each other because meaningful presence requires that we, first of all, stand in the open. As we become individuals through affective self-finding, we come to stand in a perspective *in* the open. A perspective from which certain aspects of the world show themselves, while others remain concealed.

If we make the same move as I sketched above, we could argue that different strong evaluations indicate different genuine morally relevant aspects of a shared world. The dissimilarity between this move and the arguments above is that the aspects of the situation that I am attuned to can be grounded in an objectively present world. Everybody will agree that there are people who throw their cigarettes on the ground and there is a friend who is spending money even though he needs to pay his rent. When making the same move to defend the non-arbitrariness of strong evaluations, there must be a realm of morally relevant aspects that grounds the strong evaluations and makes it possible for different understandings to value them in different valid ways.

This problem can be dealt with by showing that leading a human life presupposes a shared moral sphere in which a multiplicity of perspectives can reside. An instance of such an argument can be found in Nussbaum's *Non-Relative Virtues*. The point of her essay is to argue that there is a nominal description

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[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 428–29.

of the Aristotelian virtues. Nominal descriptions of the Aristotelian virtues are neutral because they only indicate a sphere of necessary experiences in any human life. In her paper she presents a list that is supposed to show how necessary dimensions of human experience imply that any culture has to take a stand on them.[29] These necessary dimensions of experience could provide the grounding that strong evaluations need in order to be genuine aspects of human life for these cultures. This leaves us with the question of how different relations to these spheres of experience can be more than arbitrary judgements when there is no yardstick to determine their correctness.

A preliminary answer can be drawn from the primacy of being-in-the-world. If, as a precondition of every kind of perspective, one must first be in the open, then that 'opens up' the possibility for claiming that the world can grant itself in multiple ways. Strong evaluation could, in principle, be an expression of *genuine aspects of the moral sphere of human life that are experienced from a perspective*.

Let us briefly go over one example on Nussbaum's list to show how this might solve the problem. One dimension of the sphere that Nussbaum identifies is that of bodily appetites and their pleasures.[30] Taken very generally, the opposition between the Greco-Roman and the Christian understanding of the correct way of relating to bodily appetites will provide a general sketch of how this could work.

Within Greco-Roman thought there is a focus on moderation and using *logos* to keep oneself from being affected by the sway of these bodily appetites, while still being able to enjoy them from time to time.[31] In the Christian understanding, however, individuals should completely refrain from satisfying any and all bodily appetites, for individuals are incapable of moderation and will not be able to control themselves.[32] The Greco-Roman perspective on this domain of human experience is shaped by their understanding of the individual as a rational animal that uses *logos* to master itself. The perspective of the Christian originates from an understanding of individuals as beings created by God, but who are inescapably sinful and influenced by the devil. It is quite uncontroversial to hold that humans can be moderate and control themselves so that they are not slaves of their appetites. At the same time, it is also quite evident that humans are susceptible to the pull of bodily pleasures, sometimes in such a way that it will govern their lives. For this reason, I would like to conclude that both understandings of our relation to bodily pleasures are attuned to a genuine aspect of human life. It is true that we are capable of moderation, but it is also true that we are capable of reaching a state in which we can no longer control ourselves. Both perspectives have a different focus, while being grounded in the necessary sphere of moral experiences.

When we combine what we have argued so far, we can conclude that there is no yardstick for determining *the* correct perspective. But, because both perspectives are attuned to a genuine aspect of the necessary human sphere of experience, the strong evaluations that follow are not subjective judgements. They are genuine ways of relating to the world. Moreover, the familiarity and attunement that make up our understanding are so pervasive that we hardly even notice our reliance on them. Since there is no principled way of determining their correctness on this level of inquiry, we should be ready to radically re-evaluate our evaluations. A perspective is always limited, so we should always be open to

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[29] Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (September 1988): 246, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1988.tb00111.x.
[30] Nussbaum, 246.
[31] See for instance: Seneca, *Ad Licilium Epistulea Morales*, trans. R. M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
[32] Michel Foucault, 'About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth', *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 198–227.

see the world in a different light.

Conclusion

In this essay I set out to discuss a metaethical position that goes beyond the traditional wondering about normative ethical claims and reaches a sense of wonder. I used a puzzling passage from Taylor's 'Responsibility for Self' as a starting point. In this chapter Taylor claims that there is no universal yardstick to determine the correctness of moral evaluations and that it follows that we have a responsibility to constantly re-evaluate our evaluations. The puzzle that we are left with is *how* he is able to defend that there is no yardstick and *why* such a responsibility would follow.

Dealing with this puzzle required a discussion of Taylor's rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice. I chose to take this route because Taylor's rejection rests on two unarticulated philosophical commitments from which the claim that there is no universal yardstick follows. The two central philosophical commitments that I discerned from his rejection of Sartre's theory of radical choice were: the primacy of being-in-the-world and its relation to (primordial) attunement. I explained the primacy of being-in-the-world by drawing on the distinction Heidegger makes between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand. The first is a characterisation of the being of beings when they are used within an activity. According to Heidegger, these beings are dealt with on the basis of familiarity with the world and function within a referential totality that forms the basis of meaning within the world. Presence-at-hand is the being of beings that are merely objectively present. This usually happens when a being is no longer fit to function within an activity, or when we place ourselves outside the world. The point of this distinction is to show that our way of dealing with the world is strongly intertwined with the way it is meaningfully present. This can only be possible when we are always already in the open realm in which meaningful presence can be determined by being. It also illustrates how our primary way of being is within a meaningful world with which we are engaged and that derives its meaning from our activities. Relating to beings as objects is a secondary mode that is possible only because we are first and foremost in the world.

I identified attunement and Gibsonian affordances as the other implicit philosophical commitments in Taylor rejection of Sartre, since strong evaluations are explications of the significance of the world. Beings can be drawn to act because, on the basis of their attunement with the world, they matter to other human beings, and because they are attuned to what they afford. It became clear that this is crucial for seeing why being-in-the-world is presupposed in any (moral) dilemma.

These two central philosophical commitments provide the basis for Taylor's claim that there is no universally correct yardstick. The key argument is that, because strong evaluations are drawn from meaning revealing practices for dealing with the world, there is no way of determining their correctness on the basis of universally true principles. This is precisely the reason *why* Taylor calls upon us to radically re-evaluate our evaluations. It is a way of guarding the openness that makes us capable of going beyond what we have been given. This is what I identify as going beyond traditional wondering, towards a more original understanding of its possibility.

The final part of this paper dealt with the problem that arises when one combines the claim that there is no universally correct yardstick with the claim that first-order evaluations are not just arbitrary judgements. I tried to provide a possible path that can be followed to deal with this problem. I started

by showing how the perspectival character of attunement can be reconciled with being open to a shared world. A shared world that is rich enough for different perspectives to focus on different genuine aspects without contradicting each other. This was followed up by suggesting the usage of the structure of Nussbaum's argument in favour of non-relative virtues to show how we are all open to a shared realm of moral experiences. The shared sphere of experience functions like the shared world and makes it possible for different perspectives to reveal different genuine aspects of this sphere of experience. To make this more convincing I used a very general analysis of the differences between the Greco-Roman and the Christian understanding of man's ability to deal with bodily appetites. My analysis showed how seemingly contradicting strong evaluations could still get at genuine aspects of a shared moral sphere.

The question of whether it is possible to ground a multiplicity of perspectives on a shared moral sphere would also be interesting for further research. This asks for a more detailed account of how to deal with the problem of an 'anything goes' morality, which would be something that would jeopardise the whole thrust of Taylor's argument. To answer this question would require a more detailed account of the implications of a multiplicity of valid perspectives on the nature of truth in general. The challenge will be to show that this position is not an ordinary relativism, but, instead, an extraordinary realism.

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