

# The self as the locus of morality: A comparison between Charles Taylor and George Herbert Mead's theories of the moral constitution of the self

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## Abstract

This paper provides a critical comparison of two leading exponents of the relationship between morality and selfhood: Charles Taylor and George Herbert Mead. Specifically, it seeks to provide an assessment of the contribution each approach is able to make to a social theory of morality that has the self at its heart. Ultimately, it is argued that Taylor's phenomenological account neglects the significance of interaction and social relations in his conceptualisation of the relationship between morality and self, which undermines the capacity of his framework to explain how moral understandings and dialogic moral subjectivity develop in a world of shared meaning. I then argue that Mead's pragmatist interactionist approach overcomes many of the flaws in Taylor's framework, and offers a grounded conceptualisation of the relationship between self and morality that is able to provide a basis for a properly social account of moral subjectivity.

## KEYWORDS

Charles Taylor, George Herbert Mead, moral self, moral subjectivity, morality, social theory

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a critical comparison of two leading exponents of the relationship between morality and selfhood: Charles Taylor and George Herbert Mead. Despite their stature, and despite considerable overlap between their work, comparison between the two is surprisingly absent. As well as seeking to redress this lack, this paper provides a critical evaluation of the extent to which the work of Taylor and Mead respectively can offer a workable theory of the relationship between selfhood and morality. Both Taylor and Mead pave the way for the argument that a social conception of self is necessary to understanding the significance of morality to people's lives. This is an argument that is increasingly taken up in contemporary social theories of morality (e.g. Abbott, 2020; Hookway, 2017; Morgan, 2016), meaning that a comparison between Mead and Taylor is particularly timely. The comparison in this paper thus seeks to provide an assessment of which approach offers the soundest basis for a social theory of morality that has the self at its heart.

The lack of comparison thus far perhaps reflects Taylor's own neglect of Mead, who is barely mentioned throughout Taylor's work, even in *Sources of the Self* (1989) which covers themes analogous to those found in Mead's oeuvre (Joas, 2000). Where Mead is mentioned, it is by way of passing critique (Taylor, 1989, 1995, 2016). Taylor's critiques of Mead have been neither expounded nor challenged in much depth<sup>1</sup>, something that this paper also seeks to address. While the critiques are hardly resounding, they reveal important differences between the two approaches to morality and selfhood. I argue that the key differences between the two approaches lie in the relative significance accorded to the social, specifically social interaction, in the formation and enactment of moral selfhood. More significantly, I maintain that while Taylor's exploration of the intellectual history of Western moral sources is exemplary, the way he hinges his argument on a 'transcendental' phenomenological account of identity (1989, p. 32), rather than an interactional social ontology, has problematic consequences both for how Taylor understands the relationship between morality and selfhood, and for the use of his work for a social theory of this relationship. While Calhoun (1991, p. 233) argues that Taylor's work does nonetheless 'offer extremely valuable guidelines and first steps to this potential sociological enterprise', I argue that Taylor's neglect of social interaction in his discussions of the self, morality, and identity—interminably social phenomena as they are—leads to conceptualisations of the relationship between these phenomena that are problematic.

I begin by setting out Taylor's contribution to understanding the moral self. Taylor's moral theory has perhaps not received the attention in social theory that some feel it deserves (Calhoun, 1991), and so the first part of this paper will attempt to set out what Taylor's wide-ranging arguments are and how they relate to a social theory of morality. The second section will then explore the limitations of Taylor's framework. Specifically, I argue that Taylor's phenomenological account provides an overly intellectualist depiction of identity and neglects the fundamental significance of interaction and social relations in his conceptualisation of the relationship between morality and selfhood. As well as meaning that his framework is not adept to explain how moral understandings develop and are enacted, I argue that this neglect means Taylor is unable to sufficiently account for the intersubjective development of dialogic moral subjectivity within a world of shared meaning, something that he takes to be definitive of his moral theory. Into the final section, I address Taylor's criticisms of Mead. I argue these criticisms are misplaced, but I also aim to show that Mead in fact provides a more workable argument for the kind of individuated dialogic moral subjectivity that Taylor himself is keen to preserve. This leads me to argue that a Meadian approach overcomes many of the flaws in

Taylor's framework, and offers a grounded conceptualisation of the relationship between self and morality that is able to provide a basis for a properly social account of moral subjectivity.

## 2 | TAYLOR AND THE MORALITY OF SELFHOOD

*Sources of the Self* (1989; hereafter referred to as *Sources*) provides Taylor's preeminent contribution to moral philosophy. It is in *Sources* that Taylor seeks to redraw the significance of selfhood to philosophic questions of morality. A work of the grandness of *Sources* inevitably delivers a number of significant contributions, however two principal aims can be identified. The first is to show 'how deeply flawed any account of human personhood must be which tries to address identity separately from moral subjectivity' (Calhoun, 1991, p. 233), and the second is to develop an neo-hermeneutic account of the making of modern identity, which fuses an argument for seeing intellectual historicity as being integral to the formation of the modern self with Taylor's own conception of 'philosophical anthropology' (described as 'the study of the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained' [Taylor, 1964, p. 4]).

Taylor's (1989, p. 3) first task is thus to demonstrate that '[s]elfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes'. His intention is to re-centre the significance of personhood in moral thought, an aim motivated by what he sees as the necessary task of broadening the horizons of moral philosophy beyond its proceduralist hegemony, which is restrictively concerned with 'what is right to do rather than what it is good to be' (Taylor, 1989, p. 3). This 'cramped and truncated view' has tended to ignore the 'dimension of our moral consciousness and beliefs altogether and has even seemed to dismiss them as confused and irrelevant' (Taylor, 1989, pp. 3 and 4). Contrary to this, Taylor maintains that a more complete conception of morality, and indeed a 'thicker' depiction of human agency, requires us to consider what underlies our conceptions of what matters to us and of what makes our lives meaningful. These are issues of moral concern, in a broadened sense of the term, which involve what Taylor (1989, p. 4) refers to as 'strong evaluations' in that they entail deeply moralised 'discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse'. Such strong evaluations provide the means through which we give meaningful expression to our lives and through which we understand our identity, without which understanding ourselves and our place within the world would be impossible.

Taylor here makes the link that he sees as integral to conceptualising how selfhood is inextricably tied to fundamentally moral sources, because he argues that these strong evaluations are necessarily tied to frameworks of the good. We 'cannot help', as Taylor (1989, p. 59) puts it, drawing on strongly qualified evaluations both in the course of giving meaning to our lives and in the doing of social life, in 'deliberating, judging situations, deciding how you feel about people', and these evaluations are themselves based on 'hypergoods', which provide the moral background of our strong evaluations (Taylor, 1989, p. 63). Hypergoods are 'constitutive goods' in that they provide the foundational framework upon which our more personal and everyday evaluations are made; they 'provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about' (Taylor, 1989, pp. 93 and 63). Taylor (1989, p. 63) takes the notion that 'all humans are to be treated equally with respect' as an example of a hypergood in modern society. While not universally espoused or enacted, it provides an overarching framework through which we understand and articulate notions of obligation to others and often questions of what it is good to be. Such frameworks 'provide the background, explicit or implicit

for our moral judgements' and frame the strong evaluations we necessarily make as we interpret our world and make sense of who we are and how we should be (Taylor, 1989, p. 26).

Taylor's argument up to this point is that (1) strong evaluations are an inherent facet of human social life, (2) we necessarily draw strong evaluations as we make sense of our lives, (3) these strong evaluations are necessarily tied to frameworks of the good, and (4) therefore, we necessarily draw on moral frameworks in the construction and articulation of our own self-understanding and in the course of doing social life. Taylor (1989, p. 32) then seeks to connect these points through his 'transcendental' 'phenomenological account of identity', which is phenomenological in the sense that it aims to explore 'how we actually make sense of our lives, and to draw the limits of the conceivable from our knowledge of what we actually do when we do so', and argues that it would be inconceivable for us to be able to make sense of our lives outside of the bounds of moral frameworks. Taylor argues that '[m]y identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try and determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose', that 'an identity is something that one ought to be true to, can fail to uphold,' and thus further still that '[m]y self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am' (Taylor, 1989, pp. 27, 30 and 35). But for Taylor (1989, pp. 33 and 35), answering this question, which he conceptualises as being 'essential to human personhood', 'finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers', because these 'webs of interlocution' pass on the frameworks through which we are able to form and articulate this strong sense of identity. There is a definite social element to the argument: strong identification of self relies on being able to utilise the linguistic resources into which we are necessarily situated, and the human universe is so awash with terms of strong evaluation that moral frameworks form an integral and inescapable aspect of the linguistic resources in which we are situated as selves (Abend, 2014).

But Taylor's overall intention is to tie in his phenomenological account of identity with a deeper ontological argument about how personhood and human agency are necessarily tied in with moral frameworks. Taylor explicitly seeks to move beyond what he sees as the weaker hypothesis that it is 'contingently true' that humans are socialised into moral understandings, and into the 'stronger' hypothesis that there is a moral dimension to human agency (Taylor, 1989, p. 22), which must necessarily 'appear to itself against a background of strong value' (Smith, 2002, p. 92). Taylor's (1989, p. 27) thesis is that 'living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency', to the extent that 'stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood'. He argues that his 'discussion of identity indicates [...] that it belongs to the class of the inescapable, i.e., that it belongs to human agency to exist in a space of questions about strongly valued goods' (1989, p. 31). 'Our identity is what allows us to define what is important to us and what is not' (1989, p. 30), and '[w]hat this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be orientated in moral space', and 'this orientation, once attained, defines where you answer from, hence your identity' (1989, p. 28 and 29). 'But then what emerges from all this is that we think of this moral orientation as essential to being a human interlocutor [...] To understand our predicament in terms of finding or losing orientation in moral space is to take the space which our frameworks seeks to define as ontologically basic' (1989, p. 29).

Taylor's argument thus becomes that the linguistically-mediated moral frameworks in which we necessarily reside not only express our identity, but also express and articulate an orientation towards the good that he sees as a basic facet of the 'ontology of the human': moral

frameworks provide the ‘background picture’ which allows us to articulate ‘our moral and spiritual intuitions’ (1989, p. 5 and 8). Taylor’s point is that our base-level moral reactions towards death and suffering ‘are almost like instincts’, and that these intuitions are manifested in the broadest moral frameworks of ‘all human societies’ (1989, p. 4). Overarching moral frameworks express basic moral intuitions, while at the same time providing the culturally-specific renderings and linguistic resources through which this ontological orientation is expressed; the cultural history of our moral world provides the linguistic means through which we ‘make sense’ of and ‘articulate these intuitions’ (Taylor, 1989, pp. 30 and 8). This point represents an important tension in Taylor’s work, which is to match up a notion of basic ontological moral orientations with the argument that the expression of such orientations is culturally and historically specific.

Identity is the medium through which Taylor attempts to resolve this tension. He uses it to encapsulate how features that he takes to be fundamental to human agency (including articulating questions of who we see ourselves as being, and being oriented within moral space) are linked with broad historically-shaped moral frameworks, which provide the linguistic resources through which we interpret our self-understanding in terms of our identity. Taylor’s argument that moral selfhood is given expression within historically-oriented frameworks of the good thus leads him to attempt to fuse his ontological account of moral personhood with a neo-hermeneutic account of intellectual history, which he sees as setting the horizons within which the modern moral identity is understood (Calhoun, 1991).

The second part of *Sources*, then, takes us on a *tour de force* exploration of the intellectual history of Western thought, examining in depth how significant facets of the Western canon have conceptualised of personhood, and how this has moulded the frameworks through which modern identity and moral selfhood are understood beyond the ivory towers of intellectualism. Taylor’s extensive discussion of who he sees as being particularly significant to modern conceptions of selfhood—from Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Locke, to the thought of Utilitarianism, Nietzsche, and Romanticism, and up to contemporary espousals of ‘naturalism’—are too detailed to be dealt with in depth here. In general terms, Taylor breaks down his argument into three major movements in thought that he sees as being of particular significance to the moral terms through which identity is understood in modern society (Hittinger, 1990).

The first is the instantiation of ‘radical’ reflexivity (Taylor, 1989, p. 131), which involves an understanding of inwardness ‘as a basic ontological property like “having” arms and legs’ (Hittinger, 1990, p. 114). According to Taylor, such inwardness was introduced into Western discourse initially through the work of Augustine, who sought to foster an approach to self-understanding that moved beyond simply being an object of one’s own consideration, and into a deeper condition of attempting to experience our own experience (Calhoun, 1991). Through Descartes and Locke, this developed through the modern era into a stronger reification of the objectification of self, which ultimately led to what Taylor (1999) elsewhere depicts as the erroneous modernist view of monological consciousness, through which the disembodied rational reasoning of the autonomous subject came to be seen as both the hallmarks of personhood and the condition of moral subjectivity.

The ‘second major aspect of the modern identity’ is what Taylor (1989, p. 211) refers to as the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ as the primary arena for understanding and cultivating the self in relation to the good. From the Reformation, ‘the locus of the good life’ was dislocated from ‘higher activities’, such as ‘the supreme importance for politics’ for Aristotle or the supposed ‘citizen ethic’ and ‘aristocratic ethics of honour’ that Taylor identifies in early modern Europe, and relocated into aspects of human life concerned with labour, marriage and family. Rather

than being 'outranked' by 'higher activities', such facets of ordinary life became the proper locus of a good existence (1989, pp. 212 and 213). The third major feature of modern identity, Taylor argues, was engendered by the 'expressivist turn' of 19th-century philosophy and literature, which instilled the assumption that 'authentic' selfhood necessitates the discovery and articulation of our inner nature (Hittinger, 1990). The expressivist turn embedded the notion 'that each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live', and instilled 'the obligation on each of us to live up to our originality', something which Taylor sees as being 'one of the cornerstones of modern culture' (1989, pp. 375 and 376).

These are the three major sources of the modern identity that Taylor identifies, and the intellectual historicity of these combined sources provide the hermeneutic horizons of how the modern self is articulated and understood in moral terms. While Taylor is quick to acknowledge the 'gains' (1989, p. 61) that have been made to our moral understanding of the world and ourselves through these terms, he is deeply critical of their consequences for our modern moral outlook, which he takes to be broadly individualist, disenchanted, and couched in emotivism. In often quite moralistic and nostalgic terms, Taylor (1989, p. 508) argues that we live in a world defined by 'the loss of substance, the increasing thinness of ties and shallowness of things... A society of self-fulfillers, whose affiliations are more and more seen as revocable'.

The sources of the modern identity, as they developed *vis-à-vis* Enlightenment thought, has also had consequences for how morality has been conceptualised intellectually, which Taylor argues has resulted in modern understandings of morality being framed in a number of incongruous ways. He maintains that Enlightenment thought framed moral questions in terms of rationalism while discounting cultural historicities, intuitions, and moral aspects of selfhood as necessary grounds on which moral issues are located and understood. This Enlightenment stance firstly has led to modern moral understandings of morality being framed by what Taylor refers to as 'naturalism'. This is something of a catch-all phrase used by Taylor to depict a modernist tendency towards 'scientific reductionism' (Frisina, 2002, p. 17), which encompasses the 'radical reduction' of the significance of meaning to human lives (Taylor, 1989, p. 19). Taylor argues that the naturalist outlook renders the 'issue of meaning a pseudo-question' (1989, p. 19), and assumes that the layers of 'moral, social and religious meaning that appear to constitute human agency are really something else, something that is only properly understood from the point of view developed by modern natural science' (Smith, 2002, pp. 6 and 7). However, similarly to MacIntyre (1985), Taylor argues the Enlightenment attempt to abstract morality from the cultural and spiritual meanings, intuitions, and identities upon which it is in fact based has led to moral issues being seen as intractable in the rationalist terms set by modernist epistemologies themselves. This intractability has led, in Taylor's eyes, to the coterminous perception, also common in modern society, that morality is either beyond the bounds of what can be systematically understood or instead reflects little more than emotivism.

Taylor thus sees the proliferation of naturalism as circumscribing the epistemic horizons of how morality and selfhood are understood in the modern world in several ways. He of course sees it as being instrumental in undermining the significance of spiritualism as a moral source. But he also argues that it is inculcated in the dominance of proceduralist outlooks in philosophy, which attempt to provide principles for guiding 'correct' moral action in abstraction of circumstance and subjective meaning (Hittinger, 1990). Furthermore, and almost conversely to the rationalist explication of procedures for moral action, Taylor sees the naturalist mindset as constituting the context in which morality is posited in terms of emotivism, or reduced altogether to a facet of cognitive behaviour, which, if accessible at all, is accessible to behavioural, psychological, and even neurological analysis alone.



In terms of selfhood, Taylor (1989) is deeply critical of the propensity of Enlightenment thought to characterise subjectivity in terms of detached rationality, which casts the significance of personal and cultural meaning as inferior, rather than as an inescapable facet of personhood. Taylor likewise sees the naturalist propensity to 'understand human beings as self-contained objects of scientific study' as endemic in what he quite unceremoniously lumps together as 'social scientific' approaches to selfhood (Calhoun, 1991, p. 234), in which selves are apparently understood as being socially 'introjected', or established only in relation to specific social situations, or simply as cognitive renderings (Taylor, 1995, p. 65).

It is this polymorphous combination of modernist depictions of morality and selfhood that has deemed the 'inextricably intertwined' nature of these concepts as inexplicable to modern thought (Taylor, 1989, p. 3). What all of these approaches have thoroughly 'removed from the explanandum' is the meanings and the terms of strong evaluation, circumscribed by moral frameworks, through which people make sense of their lives (1989, p. 58). It is here that Taylor (1989, p. 510) thus links back to the earlier argument of the book, as he ties in his critique of naturalism with an affirmation of a moral theory that affords a place to historically-orientated and biographically-understood moral subjectivity, which is articulated by 'the subject through languages that resonate *within* him or her'. Taylor (1989, p. 509) argues that the proliferation of the modern sources of identity has resulted in a distinct 'problem of the loss of meaning in our culture'. Yet, as a result of this, and as a result of how the modern identity is understood in relation to these sources, he argues that the individual self becomes the necessary locus of moral understanding: 'We are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim to defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance' (1989, p. 512). What is thus needed is a moral theory in which meaning and 'making sense' of the world is taken to be ontologically basic, which leads to the articulation of one's identity in relation to linguistically-mediated frameworks as a necessary feature of personhood, but which thereby also allow the meaningfulness of moral sources to be understood and engaged with in a way that is 'inseparably indexed to a personal vision' (1989, p. 510). However, Taylor (1989, p. 72) argues, 'what I call the exploration of order through personal resonance' is inadequately considered by most philosophic perspectives, which, due to their proceduralist emphasis, are unable to consider 'the meaning things have for us' in serious terms.

Taylor thus posits a moral theory that centralises a place for efficacious moral subjectivity, which is able to articulate moral standpoints that reflect who we understand ourselves as being within a world of shared meaning (Taylor, 1989). This is something that Taylor sees both Mead's theory of the socially emergent self (Taylor, 1995) and Habermas's communicative ethics (Taylor, 1989) as being unable to facilitate. Similarly to Taylor (1989, p. 509), Habermas, who 'borrowed a great deal from George Herbert Mead', sees the self as being 'constituted by language, hence by exchange between agents'. However, Taylor (1989, p. 510) argues, without a phenomenological account of personhood that centres interpretiveness and articulation of meaning as foundational to subjectivity, in Habermas's (and by extension Mead's) explanation 'there is no coherent place left for an exploration of the order in which we are set as a locus of moral sources'. From Taylor's (1989, p. 510) account, this 'order is only accessible through personal, hence 'subjective', resonance', in which the individual is able to—and necessarily does—articulate the meaning of 'moral sources *outside* the subject through languages that resonate *within* him or her'.

I will go on to set out why Taylor is incorrect in his diagnosis that the Meadian basis of Habermas's argument is unable to leave room for an articulating moral subjectivity. Further,

I will argue that by basing its explanation on the social development of individuated subjectivity, rather than on a phenomenology of personhood, a Meadian approach is in fact much better placed to explain the emergence of such a moral subjectivity.

### 3 | CRITIQUING TAYLOR'S VIEW OF MORAL SELFHOOD

Critiques have been levelled against Taylor's theory of moral selfhood on a variety of grounds. Several commentators have questioned the claims made by Taylor that the relationship between moral sources and human subjectivity is ontologically essential (Frisina, 2002; Hittinger, 1990; Kerr, 2004; Smith, 2002). As Smith (2002, p. 117) has argued, from the basis of Taylor's phenomenological account of personhood and his account of the role moral sources play within human agency, 'it is not clear why moral sources must feature in an *ontology* of the human'. As discussed, Taylor bases his ontological claim that 'orientation in relation to the good is essential to being a functional human' upon a phenomenological account of personhood, which ultimately rests upon the argument that '[t]o lose this orientation, or not to have found it, is to not know who one is', and thus a person without such an orientation would necessarily be 'in the grips of an appalling identity crisis', and if 'the person doesn't suffer this absence of frameworks as a lack, isn't in other words in a crisis [...] we should see such a person as deeply disturbed' (1989, p. 42 and 29, 31). Taylor's resort to identity crisis, which in itself is neither empirical proof nor ontological truth, is telling of the fact that, within the framework he sets for himself, 'all Taylor can do is rely upon the phenomenological argument that we cannot imagine ourselves operating in the world without engaging in a continual evaluative process' (Frisina, 2002, p. 18). Even if we did accept the ontological stature of moral sources (something which itself is questionable), this 'would still not entitle us to say that human subjectivity is *essentially* constituted by moral sources' on the basis of Taylor's argument (Smith, 2002, p. 117).

There are analogous problems with Taylor's conceptualisation of identity. Taylor posits his concept of identity in reified terms, as being 'defined by the commitments and identifications' that allow me to determine 'what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done', and as 'something that one ought to be true to' (1989, p. 27 and 30). This is a much more concretised and much less socially dynamic picture of identity than most other dominant conceptualisations allow (Flanagan, 1990). Indeed, Taylor has been criticised for providing an overly intellectualist and overly moralised depiction of identity (Flanagan, 1990). Taylor's conceptualisation has been characterised as erroneously intellectualist in that it defines identity in terms of proverbially 'higher' intellectual and reflective faculties of the subject, notably in terms of the individual's capacity to articulate and live up to commitments that they take to be definitive of who they are (Flanagan, 1990). This relates to the latter charge that Taylor's conceptualisations of identity are overly moralistic. Taylor (1989, p. 28) explicitly defines identity through moral orientation, using his conceptualisation of identity as an 'essential link' connecting his ontology of the person with moral sources. It is hard to not read his concept of identity as being formulated in the way that it is specifically to achieve the ends of this ontological argument. Even if this were not the case, Taylor seems to exaggerate 'the role played by moral principles in constituting identity' (Smith, 2002, p. 95). Combined, the intellectualist and moralised conceptualisation of identity that Taylor presents has been accused of being decidedly 'top-down', in the sense that it assumes that identity is defined by our deliberations and articulations of who we are in relation to the values and commitments we hold (Rorty & Wong, 1990, p. 36).



Elsewhere, this is a line of critique that Taylor (2004, p. 73) himself is keen to make against the flaws of the 'modern epistemology'. Beyond his moral philosophy, Taylor's intellectual project has cohered around philosophic critiques that challenge deeply embedded Enlightenment notions of 'monological' consciousness (Taylor, 1999, 2004). In such accounts, Taylor fully advocates setting 'the primary locus of the agent's understanding in practice', which he takes to mean that 'much of our intelligent action in the world' reflects a partially articulated understanding of the social world into which we are habituated (Taylor, 1999, pp. 33 and 34). Here, Taylor (1999, p. 35) depicts firm and clear articulations based on reflective self-awareness as rare 'islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp of the world'. Several commentators have thus identified a disconnect between the subject presented by Taylor's Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian based analytic arguments for centring human understanding in terms of practice, and the subject presented in his moral theory which is orientated around the apprehending and articulation of moral sources in relation to an intimate discursive self-understanding (Kerr, 2004; Shapiro, 1986). The point here is that Taylor's account of the significance of moral sources to personhood 'is surprisingly cognitive and discursive', and provides little insight into inarticulate moral activity (Calhoun, 1991, pp. 261 and 262).

Furthermore, while Taylor argues that our articulations are crucial to understanding ourselves, a rounded consideration of how identities and moral selfhood are experienced and lived out in practice is left largely unexplored, which are neglected in favour of an extensive exploration of the (Western) intellectual history through which the parameters for understanding modern identity have been constituted. Joas (1996) argues that the content and course of this argument gives the impression that Taylor was interested in experience only when it provides a springboard for his contemplation of intellectual history. Indeed, when compared alongside works that cover similar themes, such as William James's work on religious experience, Dewey's work on ethics, or Mead's interactional arguments of the self, it quickly becomes evident how sparse references to experience and practice in Taylor's work are (Joas, 1996).

This highlights notable absences in Taylor's historiography, for while he ostensibly seeks to exhaustively explore the intellectual horizons that frame the modern identity, the intellectual history that Taylor describes makes only brief remarks about pragmatism. Joas (2000, p. 142) describes Taylor's 'downright spectacular' disregard of pragmatism as not simply a matter of thematic selectivity, but rather as a telling omission that represents a disregard of social and concrete experience in Taylor's moral theory, which are seemingly considered secondary to philosophic history in the constitution of modern moral life, and this has significant consequence to the systematic claims of Taylor's arguments.

Indeed, as Calhoun (1991, p. 260) reiterates, *Sources* 'is a book almost exclusively about those intellectual elites, written with no more than passing reference to some very important sociological factors and questions':

[Taylor] presents us with a history of the transformations producing the modern self written almost entirely through "great men"; he gives little attention to how or in what degree this process influenced, reflected, or was in tension with the lives and thought of women or other men, how it may have varied systematically by social context or position, or how it was shaped by broader patterns of social change.

(Calhoun, 1991, p. 233)

Taylor (1989) of course acknowledges that intellectual history cannot be detached from sociocultural history and also from economic and political change. However, he argues forcibly

that the themes he identifies as being integral to modern identity are the distinct product of shifts in intellectual history. Claims such as '[i]t is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity' (p. 131) or that an 'epoch-making' change occurred when 'Descartes situates the moral sources within us' (p. 143) are commonplace in Taylor's historiography, which suggests an overestimation of the role of philosophers in constructing the modern identity and what most people take to be moral in the modern world. While philosophic discourse has of course had a profound impact on how the self and morality are understood, Taylor often depicts shifts in moral frameworks as being much more dependent on the thought of philosophers than seems feasible, rather than seeing such frameworks and shifts as being tied to a complex and emergent nexus of social, cultural, political, and economic relations that extends far beyond philosophic treatise. Capitalism, for example, only features occasionally in Taylor's discussion of the sources of modern individualism, and as Calhoun (1991, p. 260) illuminates:

Taylor notes the role of the eighteenth-century novel, but not the rise and partial popularization of the university, the expansion of the reading public, the spread of new media, [...] the introduction of democratic politics, the rise of state bureaucracies, the shrinking size of the family[...] All of these unquestionably have played a role in the transformation of moral sources and the reconstitution of selfhood.

As well as neglecting social and cultural transformations outside of intellectual history that have shaped the frameworks of modern identities and moral understandings, Taylor is similarly indifferent to the significance of direct social relationships in moulding our identities and moral sensibilities on a personal level. He scarcely acknowledges the 'power of our strongest social relations', in defining both our identity and orienting and moulding our moral perspectives (Calhoun, 1991, p. 262). It seems quite plain that our moral understandings, identities, and actions reflect 'concrete, highly immediate, and even embodied sensitivity to how our actions fit into the relationships we most value' and also that such relationships 'become moral sources' in themselves (Calhoun, 1991, p. 262). Empirical research has illustrated that while family life is 'animated by and linked to wider notions of right and wrong' (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2007, p. 405), which are drawn from 'ideas about moral obligations derived from wider culture' (Finch, 1989, p. 143), interpretations of one's own responsibility and obligations towards one's family vary considerably in reflection of the circumstances and expectations of the familial relationships, with subjective interpretations of responsibilities and obligations developing and emerging interpersonally between family members, often in relation to unfolding situational contexts, which mould assessments of what the 'proper thing to do' is in practice (Abbott, 2020). Taylor's neglect of the significance of social relationships means that his conceptual framework is ill-equipped to explore how moral understandings and identities develop and how these are lived at the level of practice.

This is of great significance because, as I will go on to argue alongside Mead, it is through interactions and social relationships that selves and identities develop, and also through these that the moral sources that Taylor emphasises enter into the understanding and experience of individuals. Taylor (1989, p. 35) is of course keen to emphasise that selves are constituted in language, and he acknowledges that '[a] self can never be described without reference to those who surround it'. However, where the social and intersubjective dimensions of selfhood and morality are hinted at, these are couched in philosophic exegesis rather than well-supported social explanation, meaning that the social processes through which the self emerges, the

interactional and plural formation of identities, and the intersubjective, socially emergent, and contextually-bound nature of much of our moral action is found seriously wanting. Indeed, while ostensibly about the self, several have argued that *Sources* in fact provides only a limited theory of self, primarily because claims of the intersubjective emergence of the self and identity hinted at in Taylor's argument are insufficiently developed (Frisina, 2002; Joas, 2000; Smith, 2002).

Running through all of the critiques addressed here is the point that Taylor looks past the basic and concrete role that social interaction and social relations play in the relationship between morality and selfhood. Despite references to intersubjectivity and language, the frameworks of identity, personhood, and historical explanation through which Taylor's arguments are formed are surprisingly ill-equipped to explore the significance of intersubjective interaction to moral selfhood, and his attempts to establish an ontological basis for an articulating moral subjectivity through these terms neglects what is in fact basic, which is that even 'the most private and personal moral endeavour is based on judgments and sentiments that have been developed through social experience and spread by social contacts' (Hayes, 1918, p. 296). I argue next that the work of Mead provides much clearer direction in this regard.

#### 4 | MEAD AND A SOCIAL THEORY OF MORAL SELFHOOD

In commenting on Taylor's aforementioned neglect of pragmatism, Joas (2000, p. 143) highlights that what is interesting about this omission is that '[h]e is not ignoring a tradition that threatens his convictions, but a school of thought which could offer support, indeed inspiration for his arguments' (see also Frisina, 2002). This point, I argue, applies most fervently to the omission of Mead, not least because Mead covers virtually identical themes to those that dominate Taylor's work: the self, language, and morality. Although considered to be the forefather of theories of the social emergence of the self, throughout his work, Taylor 'refers to Mead only superficially and misleadingly' (Joas, 1997, p. xxi). In *Sources* Taylor restricts his consideration of Mead to a footnote which claims 'Mead is too close to behaviourism and not aware of the constitutive role of language in the definition of self and relations' (Taylor, 1989, p. 525). Joas (1997, p. xxi) describes this as 'an odd characterization, to say the least, of the figure who is considered the inaugurator of the symbolic-interactionist tradition'.

Elsewhere, Taylor is tersely scathing of Mead. He depicts Mead's theory in the following way:

A person "becomes a self insofar as he can take [the] attitude of another towards himself as others act" [Mead, 1934, p. 171]. In the very impoverished behaviourist ontology which Mead allowed himself, this seemed to be a brilliant way to make room for something like reflexivity while remaining within the austere bounds of a scientific approach. But what we see here is something like a theory of introjection. My self is socially constituted, through the attitudes of others, as the "me".

(Taylor, 1995, p. 64)

While Mead described himself as a 'behaviorist', this was prior to the term being equated with the kind of Skinnerian behaviourist psychology with which it now more generally refers (in fact, Mead (1934) vehemently opposed earlier renditions of such behaviourism in his extensive critique of Watsonism [Joas, 1996]). The argument below will show how this

characterisation of Mead is misplaced, but it is important to register that Taylor's (1995, p. 65) real problem with Mead seems to be that Mead's theory does not yield a dialogic self: 'introjection... becomes necessary for Mead, because he doesn't have a place in his scheme for dialogical action, and he can't have this because the impoverished behavioral ontology only allows for organisms reacting to environments'. Taylor (1995, pp. 64 and 65) does not disagree with Mead that 'first definitions of ourselves are given by our parents and elders', but argues that the dialogic self that develops thereafter cannot be described in terms of 'an introjected identity and some unformed principle of spontaneity', which is how Taylor characterises Mead's 'me' and 'I' respectively.

Taylor goes on to soften his stance towards Mead somewhat in his recent work *The Language Animal*. But even here, while Taylor argues that Mead's 'self is not just an introjected dummy', he argues that Mead's challenge to monological consciousness is 'insufficiently radical' in that self-awareness is depicted as running 'alongside [...] the internalization of the other's view and expectations of me', rather than seeing 'self-awareness as emerging out of a prior intersubjective take on things' (Taylor, 2016, p. 64). Here, Taylor returns to his earlier critique against Mead that '[t]aking the stance of the other is a monological act, one that is usually influence by—or, at best, coordinated with—the other but still thoroughly mine' (1995, p. 65). Those more familiar with Mead's arguments would quickly recognise that the very basis of Mead's theory of the self is exactly what Taylor claims it is not, namely that we are practical and intersubjective before we are anything else, and it is out of this 'practical intersubjectivity' that our self-awareness develops (Joas, 1997, p. 14).

Indeed, the most basic and well-known feature of Mead's (1934, p. 135) work is his argument that the capacities associated with selfhood are developed through interaction, through a 'process of social experience and activity'. While self-consciousness is underpinned by human capacities for reflexivity, its development relies upon the individual being able to assume 'a position of reacting in himself [sic]' in the sense that the individual can respond to themselves as an object of their own consideration (Mead, 1934, p. 194). Quite unlike Taylor's depiction of him, Mead (1934, p. 69) emphasised 'the critical importance of language in the development of human experience [which] lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other'. Mead's (1912) argument is that the nascent understanding of shared meanings of gestures is integral to the development of self-consciousness because being able to respond to one's own action as the other responds to it provides the basis for the individual to experience their action as an object of their own subjectivity.

It is in this communicative process, as a child begins to recognise the meanings that her own actions carry in relation to the responses of others, that what Mead (1913) refers to as the 'I' emerges: the child develops a sense of herself as a subject who acts but who can also assume a perspective towards her action, having arrived at some degree of awareness of how her action will be received. Something that Taylor's depiction of Mead's 'I' misses—which has important consequences down the line—is that for Mead, the 'I' is the 'actor in the present tense', in the process of *doing* the acting, *doing* the monitoring of action, and, as the self develops, *doing* the reflecting upon oneself (Crossley, 2011, p. 94). Having assumed a position of being able to react to herself, the individual gradually develops a sense of the self as an object; firstly as an object for the consideration of others, and latterly as an object of her own reflective engagement (Mead, 1934).

During early stages, the child takes on, reflects upon herself, and acts in relation to the attitudes of specific others (notably care-givers) in specific interactional settings. Yet Mead (1934, p. 152) argues that 'self-consciousness in the full sense of the term' is attained as the

individual is able to view themselves not just from the standpoint of specific others, but also from the perspective of the generalised other, understood abstractly as generalised expectations, which are carried forth into interaction. As the child's sphere of interaction increases, the sources of behavioural direction diversify from specific authoritative voices of primary caregivers into a more generalised understanding of the standards of behaviour expected by the broadly construed communities of which she is part. It is here that the 'me' aspect of the self develops as the collected attitudes of others, which the individual can take towards herself and utilise in her engagement with herself as an object; she develops a me that is formed from interactionally absorbed attitudes, and it is the collected attitudes of others that form the content of the me that is reflected on as an object by the I (Mead, 1925).

It is important to recognise, however, that the development of the socialised self does not mean that the individual is merely 'introjected'. Firstly, Mead (1934, p. 140) is clear that this process provides the basis for a self that is able 'to converse with himself as he had communicated with others'. Secondly, individuals are socialised within a plurality of relationships and contexts, meaning that the attitudes of others that comprise the 'me' are diverse, and form a generalised other that is polyvocal and situationally variable, which is experienced and reflexively engaged with from hugely stratified standpoints, meaning that the self (and the instilled modes and attitudes towards conduct that it comprises) is constructed and engaged with from a multiplicity of complex and variable perspectives (Mead, 1934). Thirdly, the encountering of a plurality of attitudes leads to a plurality of reference points for the me, and consequently, in order 'for consistent behaviour to be at all possible, these different 'me's' must be synthesized into a unitary self-image', which means the reflected on me also begins to serve 'as an element of my emerging self-image' (Joas, 1997, p. 118). In relation to this, the development of the I as the thinking, acting, reflecting phase of subjectivity, facilitates the capacity for critical and evaluative responses that allow us to assume a position that can be resistant to social pressure (Bottero, 2019). Joining a protest movement or becoming vegetarian, for example, are personal decisions that may run contrary to our habituation, and yet they are socially engendered positions arrived at through dialogue conducted via a differentiated, reflective and actuating I, with a me that is constituted through the plurality of collected attitudes of others it encounters.

Contrary to Taylor's critique, a vital aspect of Mead's argument is that the emergence of the self is productive of an 'intersubjectively mediated self-understanding', which allows the individual to reflexively engage with herself through internal dialogue, and to assume standpoints that she recognises as being her own (Habermas, 1995, p. 153). Indeed, one of the key advantages of Mead's (1925, 1934) theory lies in its capacity to explain individuation as being an inherent facet of the social constitution of the self, in which interactional engagement within a complex social context is productive of a simultaneously embedded *and* individuated subjectivity, which the individual is able to reflexively acknowledge and engage with in the course of her existence.

While Taylor (1989, p. 36) is intent on establishing and maintaining a place for articulating dialogic subjectivity, apart from arguing that 'achieving self-definition' occurs within 'webs of interlocution', his theory does little to expound the process through which the deep-seated sense of identity he depicts is arrived at. Mead describes how the process of individuation begins with the development of a reflexively capable mind through the taking of attitudes of others, which provide substance to the me, but which also initiates within the individual the capacity to respond to and converse with herself. The multitude of attitudes we encounter and continue to engage with in the course of our life populates the object of our self-consciousness with an

expanding plurality of others and generalised perspectives, which we engage with and find our own voice in relation to (Crossley, 2011). And 'to the extent that this occurs, there arises an internal center for the self-steering of individually accountable conduct' (Habermas, 1995, p. 152). Mead's work thus allows us to account for the social emergence of a moral subjectivity that is thoroughly situated on the one hand, and individuated and reflexively engaged with by the actor in a way that is potentially transformative of their action and perspectives on the other.

This process begins with moral habituation. Similarly to Taylor, Mead (1925) takes normativity and moral evaluation to be an indispensable facet of social existence, which consequently plays an integral role in the emergence of the self. Indeed, in many ways, for Mead, emerging as a self means emerging as a 'moral' self, and he conceptualises the self and its emergence in normative terms: 'The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs' (Mead, 1934, p. 7). The process of emerging as a self from one's social surroundings embeds the individual within the normative expectations and values of this environment, because, from an early age, our practical activity in the social world 'depends upon the internalization of the agencies that monitor behavior, which migrate, as it were, from without to within' (Habermas, 1995, p. 152; Mead, 1925).

Initially, these attitudes tend to be the specific attitudes of specific others, most often parents and caregivers, which are primarily taught by rote. However, as this process continues, the individual becomes able to internalise more complex attitudes taken towards her by others. Instructions given to children come loaded with 'moral evaluation and emotional intonations of approval or disapproval' that the child gradually comes to be able to comprehend in relation to her developing reflexive self (Burkitt, 2008, p. 59). She comes to recognise that if she lashes out or doesn't say thank-you she will be thought of as being bad or ungrateful. This engenders a new dimension of evaluative self-judgement, notably in the form of shame and pride, as the child comes to understand how she may be judged by others (Cooley, 1902).

The emergence of the self through socialisation thus situates the actor into the taken-for-granted 'background' understanding upon which their basic moral competency is founded, which allows the individual to engage with ordinary normative parameters of their social world with an embodied habitude (Mead, 1925). However, emerging as a self in a morally-charged world leads to not just a banal habituation into normative convention, but also embeds us into deeply valued and evaluative terms and sentiments (Sayer, 2005). As children, we are not simply told how to act, nor does our social development entail the uncomplicated absorption of prescriptive rules to follow for all circumstances. We are also being taught through our interactional integration to evaluate ourselves, to take responsibility for and justify our actions and opinions, to form judgement on what it means to be a certain type of person, and to understand why certain things are personally and socially important (Burkitt, 2008). This engenders the development of moral capabilities that we take to be indicative of ordinary personhood, for example capacities of responsibility, accountability, and evaluative judgement.

While Mead (1925) argued that the internalisation of attitudes manifests in the emerging self as a pervasive mechanism of self-regulating social control, he also saw the individual's integration into patterns of normative conduct as providing the foundations on which more complex moral consciousness develops. Being able to assume the perspective of the generalised other is integral to this process because the taking on and the assumption of moral attitudes (for example in terms of evaluating one's own perspectives and values, and the assumption of responsibility for one's own conduct), as well as the capacity for moral action, depend upon the



individual being able to take the attitudes of the generalised other towards herself and her action, as well as towards others and their action (de Waal, 2008).

Contrary to a simplistic reading of the generalised other as referring to 'the attitudes of the whole community' (Mead, 1934, p. 154), Mead's deployment of the concept in fact functions on varying levels of generality and specification in relation to the situation at hand. This is clear from his exploration of the concept through the assumption of different roles within games, institutions, and in participation in politics, each of which entails engagement and negotiation with generalised attitudes of various relevant 'communities' and 'subgroups', as well as assuming 'attitudes toward his behavior of those other individuals with whom he is involved in the given social situation' (Mead, 1934, pp. 155 and 156). Mead conceptualised the 'generalised other' as a facet of practical consciousness through which perceived attitudes of others germane to the immediate intersubjective context are engaged, as well as the medium through which our own courses of action and subjective positions are negotiated (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2007). The generalised other should thus not be seen as a single voice representing a static community, but rather as a plural and emergent process that functions between providing 'barely necessary cues' for action (Mead, 1913, p. 378) and providing a sounding-board for reflection, which allows us to negotiate the 'ongoing mixture of simultaneous values that individuals must navigate in day-to-day ethical decision-making' (Burr, 2009, p. 337).

An essential point to be made is that the moral judgements and evaluations that people routinely make, and the generalised and specific attitudes of others that are engaged with in this process, while inextricably socially-constituted, are engaged with from the perspective of an active and individuated reflective subject—the 'I' in Mead's terms. Holdsworth and Morgan's (2007) studies into decisions to move away from home revealed how their participants reflexively engaged with various generalised others – parents, friends, the neighbourhood—in relation to their *own* perspective on their own decisions, with an understanding of what is at stake and what action they want to take, which frequently produced action that ran contrary to their perception of the generalised attitudes of friends, family, or the community more broadly. While the moral decisions and positions that were construed reflect deeply entangled relations within which they were formed and enacted, they were nonetheless arrived at and articulated by a moral subject who recognised these positions and decisions as being their own.

Through his conceptualisation of the individuated and dialogically capable self, Mead's theory is able to facilitate an explanation not just of moral habituation, but also of individual capacities for reflexive moral rumination about what we value, and what our moral action should be, which in turn leads to the individual's articulation and enactment of standpoints that they recognise as being their own (Habermas, 1995). However, though such dialogical transformation is potentially efficacious to personal action, what is key for Mead is that the locus of moral transformation rests upon intersubjective interaction. His interactionist theory of the self firstly establishes the ground upon which the capacity for evaluative moral judgement develops within the social emergence of the self, and secondly locates the stimulation of such evaluative judgement in interaction, as being a product of intersubjective sociality, which frequently engenders junctures of action and conflicts of viewpoint that stimulate reflexive contemplation (Joas, 1990). While Taylor is keen to assert the primacy of intersubjectivity, his discussions of interaction are surprisingly meagre, which leads to his conceptualisations of moral articulation as more detached and intellectual than some argue he intended (Calhoun, 1991).

Mead of course presents a view of the self that is strongly socially embedded. However his theory continues that while self-consciousness is indeed initiated by taking the perspective of the other, the multitude of attitudes that the individual encounters leads to the development of

a more complex form of subjectivity, in which the individual comes to form standpoints upon the social world that she recognises as being her own; standpoints that can be engaged with via internal dialogues from a position of self-conscious subjectivity, which can be efficacious to the course of the individual's action.

Explaining this phenomenon seems to be the motivation behind Taylor's attempts to explicate the relationship between selfhood and morality. But his attempt to do so through a phenomenological account of identity that neglects social relations and interaction leads him quite quickly to the recourse that addressing moral questions is an 'inescapable' facet of human agency, and that the notion of an identity not defined by some 'strongly valued preference is incoherent' (Taylor, 1989, pp. 32 and 30). Mead, however, is able to explain the assumption of autonomous moral positions as being arrived at through interactional relations, as they 'constitute a context wherein we develop the capacity to make decisions and act upon them, including decisions which deviate from social norms and resist social pressures'<sup>2</sup> (Crossley, 2006, p. 4). In this sense, the capacity to assume a moral position, to form judgements, and justify positions that one recognises as being their own, is something that is attained through the interactional emergence of a dialogic self.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

While Taylor's intention is to leave room for a dialogic moral subject within a world of shared meaning, his description of how this occurs, based as it is on his assumptions of a phenomenological account of identity, is found wanting. Contra Taylor, Mead allows us to see that the reasons why moral evaluations and judgements are of significance to people's lives is not predicated on a transcendental view of identity, in which strong evaluations are necessitated in order to be able to address 'ontologically basic' questions of who we are. Instead, Mead depicts how moral consciousness develops socially in relation to moral habituation. Selfhood emerges within a social existence that embeds us into a world permeated by more or less formalised normative and evaluative expectations and judgements, which variably pervade practices and shared ways of understanding the world and interpreting behaviour, and thus become integral both to our participation in, and our understanding of, the social world of which we are part (Burkitt, 2008). And while this social emergence of self habituates us into the moral expectations and frames of evaluation within which it is formed, it also produces a self that relates both to itself and to others, and it is this that allows the development of a morally conscious self. A notable advantage to a Meadian approach thus resides in its capacity to simultaneously recognise the socially-constituted nature of moral consciousness and the situatedness of moral action, while providing a social explanation of individuals as being reflexively active and dialogically engaged with their own action and views, as well as the views and action of others, from the perspective of their own socially-entangled subjective self-understanding. What Mead's theory of the self offers us, and what I argue is an undervalued contribution of his work (Abbott, 2020), is a properly social account of how individuated reflective moral consciousness develops through the intersubjective constitution of the self.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

I can confirm that this is an original paper that is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and I do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A brief comment of Taylor's critique of Mead is given by Joas (1997) and Joas (2000).

<sup>2</sup> 'far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality' (Mead, 1934, p. 255).

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