

**Morality, Structure, Transcendence and Theism: A response to
Melissa Lane's reading of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*¹**

[DRAFT]

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Abstract

In the light of recent interest in transcendental arguments for the existence of God, this paper is an assessment of Melissa Lane's critique of one such argument, that which emerges from Charles Taylor's magisterial work, *Sources of the Self*. Lane's assessment excels in defining the structural features of Taylor's overall argument strategy. I argue, however, that her critique of Taylor's argument strategy fails, largely due to her treatment of the elements of that strategy as discrete arguments, rather than as components of an overarching transcendental argument.

1. Introduction

In *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* Gary Gutting turns in part to the work of Charles Taylor for intellectual resources in constructing his theory of Pragmatic Liberalism. In a perceptive reading, Gutting links Taylor's strategy in *Sources of the Self* with what he calls 'Pascal's phenomenology'. Gutting writes that

Pascal planned to begin his *Apology* for the Christian religion with a description of the human condition as a combination of *grandeur et misuère* - the wealth of thought and the poverty of frailty and sin. The first step in winning over nonbelievers was to get them to realize that Christianity, with its teaching about our Fall from a heavenly destiny, offers an excellent sense of what it means to be human. The second step was to have nonbelievers see that the Christian doctrine of redemption through grace should be the hope of anyone who appreciates the human condition. Through these two steps, nonbelievers would be prepared for faith by coming to see that Christianity was a teaching that might be true and that they hoped was true².

Gutting sees in Taylor's work an argument for "phenomenological objectivity"³ that is designed to push the reader to recognise Christianity as offering not simply Pascal's 'excellent sense' of what it means to be human, but indeed the 'Best Account' of the human condition. Gutting is not alone in recognising an explicit argument in favour of Christianity in Taylor's work – George Marsden, for example, describes Taylor's contribution to a recent book, *A Catholic Modernity*, as "an explicit Christian

apologetic” and argues that Taylor’s essay represents the missing final chapter of *Sources of the Self*.⁴

Few writers, however, have offered clearer direct analysis of the form of Taylor’s argument for Christian theism than Melissa Lane and Stephen Mulhall. While both of these philosophers undoubtedly recognise the inseparability of Taylor’s explicit theory and his historical account in *Sources of the Self*, Mulhall excels at identifying the line of reasoning which shapes Taylor’s historical retrieval while Lane sharply defines the structural features of Taylor’s overall argument strategy. As good as both Lane and Mulhall’s accounts are, however, I believe that both can be improved and that Taylor’s argument emerges as more robust than either are willing to accept. In the light of recent interest in Transcendental Arguments for the Existence of God (see, for example, Sami Pihlström’s discussion in a recent issue of this journal⁵) a closer examination of these papers, which has not yet been undertaken, will be of benefit to this discourse. In this paper I will focus on Lane’s account of Taylor’s argument, and I will then turn to Mulhall’s analysis in a later, complementary paper.

Isaiah Berlin called Taylor a ‘hedgehog’, as a way of illustrating his intuition that each of the spines of Taylor’s philosophy shares a common foundation and thrust. This paper is intended to go some way towards showing that that foundation is a commitment to Christian theism. In Berlin’s terms, then, the goal of this paper is to pluck the hedgehog, and lay bare the flesh that lies beneath.

2. Lane’s Exposition of Taylor’s Theory

In her paper ‘God or Orienteering? A critical Study of Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*’⁶ Melissa Lane identifies three claims as central to Taylor’s project: “(i) that we must have a morality; (ii) that we must have a morality with a certain structure, such that particular values are connected to conceptions of the good, or ‘sources’; (iii) that we must have a morality based on an incomparably higher good.” (p. 46) The title and conclusion of Lane’s paper strongly suggest, however, that she recognises a further claim embedded in *Sources of the Self*, (iv) that we must understand the incomparably higher good on which our morality must be based in the terms of (Christian) theism. Following Lane, we can refer to these claims as “the claim of morality, the claim of structure, ... the claim of transcendence” (*ibid*) and the claim of (Christian) theism.

Lane identifies four discrete argument strategies that Taylor makes use of in attempting to establish these claims, “Phenomenological; Transcendental; Best Account; and Historical” (*ibid*). She adds that Taylor mentions, but defers to a later work, a fifth argument – “a normative argument that only theism is an adequate moral source” (*ibid*). While Lane provides no textual reference in this regard, it seems clear that she is thinking of Taylor’s acknowledgement that ‘articulation’ has multiple aspects:

It is not merely formulating what people already implicitly but unproblematically acknowledge; nor is it showing what people really rely on in the teeth of their ideological denials. Rather it could only be carried forward by showing that one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses, whether we recognize this or not. A thesis of this kind was invoked by Dostoyevsky and discussed by Lezek Kołakowski in a recent

work: “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted”. But this level of argument, concerning what our commitments really amount to, is even more difficult than the previous one, which tries to show, in the face of naturalist suppression, what they already are. I will probably not be able to venture very far out on this terrain in the following. It would be sufficient, and very valuable, to be able to show something about the tentative, hesitating, and fuzzy commitments that we moderns actually rely on. The map of our moral world, however full of gaps, erasures, and blurrings, is interesting enough.⁷

This passage suggests that, though Taylor does not explicitly set out this normative argument for theism, he has something in mind. In fact, it would not be too much of a stretch of the imagination to attribute this passage to an excessive modesty on Taylor’s part, for, as already mentioned, a good number of those who have read *Sources of the Self* have seen in it an argument for Christian theism⁸. Quentin Skinner, for example, no friend of theism, concludes that the “final message” of *Sources of the Self* is that “we cannot hope to realise our fullest human potentialities in the absence of God”⁹.

It is not my intention in this paper to enter into the debate as to whether Taylor intended to build into *Sources of the Self* a normative argument for theism. I do, however, wish to make the claim that, whatever Taylor’s explicit intention, such an argument *can* be assembled out of the material available in the book. In fact, as I hope to show here, this normative argument for theism is the natural conclusion of the combined effects of the other argument strategies that Lane identifies.

So then, following Lane with a few amendments, we can understand Taylor as making four claims - the claim of morality, the claim of structure, the claim of transcendence and the claim of theism - which he supports using five argument strategies: Phenomenological, Transcendental, Best Account, Historical and (for want of a better term) Normative-Theistic.

Having set out the breakdown of Taylor's claims and argument strategies, Lane moves on to analyse the success of the argument strategies in supporting the claims. It is here that I differ most with Lane. She concludes that "the Phenomenological and Transcendental arguments attempt to establish both (i) and (ii), that the latter can establish (i), leaving (ii) to be established by the Best Account; that in going on to establish (iii) the Best Account conflicts fatally with the Historical argument" (p. 46). In what follows I will argue that Lane reaches the wrong conclusions here, largely as a result of treating each of the argument strategies identified as stand-alone arguments rather than as interlocking parts of a single whole. By examining Lane's critique, I intend to show that Taylor's overall argument is a robust one that provides strong support for each of the claims Lane recognises, which in turn together support the claim of theism.

3. The Phenomenological argument

Lane explains that the Phenomenological argument, at least in as far as it is directed in support of claim (i), that we must have a morality, "proceeds by reflecting on our actual moral experience, to find that we always do have moral values. If someone claims to do without morality altogether, the Phenomenologist is consistently able to

show up that claim as parasitically reliant on the morality it denies” (p. 47). The claim, then, is that it is an inescapable part of the experience of human persons that the world be viewed in moral terms.

Lane, however, is unconvinced that reflection on our actual moral experience can lead us to this conclusion. She contends that “[t]he reductionist could admit all the Phenomenologist’s findings, but argue that the seeming inescapability of morality is in fact explicable as the inescapability of a will to power or a projection of emotions, or any other such claim” (p. 47).

In examining whether Lane is correct in this analysis, we need to consider Taylor’s notion of judgements of ‘strong evaluation’. These are

discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged. So while it may not be judged a moral lapse that I am living a life that is not really worthwhile or fulfilling, to describe me in these terms is nevertheless to condemn me in the name of a standard, independent of my own tastes and desires, which I ought to acknowledge.¹⁰

Strong evaluations provide, in Taylor’s schema, the boundary markers for the scope of the moral. Clearly, then, morality is more broadly defined than what Pincoffs¹¹ calls the ‘quandary ethics’ of most contemporary moral philosophy. For Taylor morality involves not merely what it is good to do, but also *what it is good to be*. It is

here that Taylor's debt to ancient ethics is paramount. Morality is concerned with "what underlies our own dignity, or questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling"¹² in addition to the normal range of questions on justice, mutual respect and so on. It is thus not surprising that Taylor feels comfortable using the terms 'moral' and 'spiritual' almost as synonyms.

When one understands Taylor's notion of morality in these terms, Lane's dismissal of the effectiveness of the Phenomenological argument in establishing the claim of morality is far less compelling. For in Taylor's terms even the will to power represents some discrimination of better and worse (if not necessarily right or wrong), for the will to power must be *directed*. Furthermore, to claim that the phenomenologist's finding that we always do make moral judgements is explicable in terms of the projection of emotions, is to ignore the phenomenological force of Taylor's insight that our strong evaluations 'stand independent' of our desires, inclinations and choices, and indeed, offer a standard by which to assess our desires. Naturally, a sceptic can deny pretty much any claim, but the explanatory priority of the phenomenological realm means that some more clairvoyant substitute be offered. Lane offers no such substitute, and we may indeed question whether one is possible.

Lane continues her critique of Taylor's phenomenological strategy when she argues further that "claim (ii) of structure cannot be established by Phenomenology. For we may experience an occlusion of our moral sources. We may feel morality to be optional or irrelevant precisely because we have lost access to those sources of moral motivation. And indeed part of Taylor's project is to say that this is not only possible but, for modern selves, actual: modern philosophy suffers an 'eclipse of our whole

awareness of qualitative distinctions,’ and this prevents us from articulating the sources that are buried within us. [Taylor *Sources of the Self*, 95] But if this is so, then appeal to our experience cannot establish necessarily that morality must have sources – for from our experience alone, we may even see reason to deny this.” (p. 50)

This criticism, however, rests on a misreading of Taylor. Taylor’s point about the occlusion of our awareness of qualitative distinctions in modern philosophy is *not* that we don’t make qualitative distinctions - he expends a good deal of ink in convincing us that these are inescapable for us - but rather that modern philosophy’s neglect of this phenomenological dimension of morality leaves no *explanation* for these reactions.

It is here that Taylor’s thought comes perhaps closest to Alasdair MacIntyre’s moral theory in which he argues that modernity has left us with only “the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived.”¹³ Taylor’s phenomenology is intended to show us that we do make qualitative distinctions, but we have largely lost comprehension of the conceptual scheme or schemes that make sense of the distinctions we make. So we are left in the strange position of being committed to certain modes of life as being ‘right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower,’ but at the same time having our commitments lack force or power because we have lost touch with the ‘conceptual scheme’ (or, in Taylor’s terminology, moral framework) that makes sense of those commitments. It is *articulation* that is needed to overcome this malady – articulation allows us to re-connect our strong evaluations to the moral sources that make sense of and give power to them.

So this second critique offered by Lane also seems to fall short of the mark. She is, however, correct in pointing out that Taylor's argument is incomplete if understood as mere phenomenology. She quotes Taylor as saying that "this is not only a phenomenological account, but an explanation of the limits of the conceivable in human life, an account of its transcendental conditions"¹⁴ and uses this as a stepping-stone to an analysis of Taylor's transcendental argument strategy¹⁵.

4. The Transcendental Argument

Lane identifies both an explicit and an implicit version of Taylor's transcendental argument strategy. The explicit argument is one

based on orientation within a community as part of the necessary conditions of human identity. The argument is developed by way of an analogy with spatial orientation. Taylor wants to impress on us that the moral aspect of orientation within a human community is as fundamental to our existence as orientation in space. ... The suggestion is that just as being surrounded by space requires us to orient ourselves as physical beings in relation to points in it, so being surrounded by other human beings requires us to orient ourselves as interlocutors in relation to them. The common requirement of orientation is taken to project a moral space with fixed questions, to correspond to the physical space of fixed points. Plurality forces us to stand in moral space just as depth forces us to stand in physical space. (p. 50)

Lane argues against Taylor's transcendental argument strategy, thus understood, on the grounds that

we do not achieve our spatial orientation by appeal to one fundamental and grounding capacity; we locate ourselves in space by means of a spectrum of data, senses, and abilities, deprivation of some of which can be compensated for by increased stress on others. Second, moral questions do not form a unity in the way that questions about spatial location do. The answers we could give to questions about our spatial orientation would serve together to specify our location. But the privileging of some moral questions over others, as more central to our identity – a privilege crucial to the claim of structure – would be like treating up/down as always and fundamentally more important than left/right. So the analogy alone gives us no support for the claim of structure by sources. (p. 51)

It is here, I think, that Lane's analysis is at its weakest. While she is correct in identifying in Taylor's work a transcendental argument strategy, her reading of Taylor's transcendental argument falls down on two crucial points – treating the phenomenological argument and the transcendental argument as distinct, stand-alone strategies; and not recognising Taylor's notions of 'webs of interlocution' and 'moral frameworks' as discrete concepts.

The first error becomes clear when we consider what Taylor says about Transcendental arguments in his paper entitled 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments'. Taylor writes that

The arguments I want to call “transcendental” start from some feature of our experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or the subject’s position in the world. They make this move by a regressive argument, to the effect that the stronger conclusion must be so if the indubitable fact about experience is to be possible (and being so, it must be possible).¹⁶

Transcendental arguments, at least as Taylor understands them, have as their first step a phenomenological argument – an argument for the inescapability of some aspect of the nature of our experience. By ignoring this, Lane’s understanding of Taylor’s transcendental argument is reduced to a much weaker argument by analogy. I shall return to this link between the phenomenological argument and the transcendental argument shortly.

The second problem with Lane’s critique lies in her treating as synonymous Taylor’s notions of ‘webs of interlocation’ and ‘moral frameworks’. Taylor believes that we are never outside of some social context, and that we each live continually within a ‘web of interlocation’, a network of others with whom we relate. Even those who shun human contact are not exempt - “[i]n the case of the hermit the interlocutor is God. In the case of the solitary artist, the work itself is addressed to a future audience, perhaps still to be created by the work itself. The very form of a work of art shows its character as *addressed*”¹⁷. It is from these webs of interlocation that we acquire the commitments and values that define us. As Taylor puts it, “[n]o one acquires the

languages needed for self definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us - what George Herbert Mead called “significant others”¹⁸.

If webs of interlocation are the means by which we acquire our values and commitments (or, in Taylor’s phrase, ‘goods’), then moral frameworks are the structures of inter-related goods so acquired. Put in other terms, the web of interlocation is the delivery system for the goods that make up the moral framework, but it is not *itself* the moral framework.

The impact of this distinction on Lane’s critique is marked. Lane understands Taylor’s transcendental argument as being about our orientation to our interlocutors. But in reality, the ‘space’ that Taylor wishes to define by analogue with physical space is existential rather than social. It is about our orientation (‘where to we stand’) in relation to the framework of moral goods that our webs of interlocation have bequeathed us.

These two misunderstandings mean that Lane’s criticisms miss the mark – the ‘critique by comparison to physical space’ only makes sense if the transcendental argument is reduced to an argument by analogy, and if that analogy is taken as an intended literal link between physical and social ‘space’. If the analogy is understood to be primarily illustrative and metaphorical, however, and the distinction between webs of interlocation and moral frameworks is clearly understood, then Taylor’s transcendental argument can be understood (at least in its opening steps) as follows¹⁹:

- (1) The nature of our experience is inescapably that of subjects;
- (2) It is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms, where “moral” encompasses all strong evaluations about the good life for humans;
- (3) The strong evaluations which are an inescapable part of our experience are themselves inescapably linked to goods, acquired through our webs of interlocution, which form the moral framework that centrally defines our identity.

There are, as we shall see, additional steps to this Transcendental argument, which depend on the other argument strategies Lane recognises Taylor as deploying. Before we continue in this vein, however, we must briefly examine the implicit transcendental argument that Lane identifies in her paper. Lane writes that

“there is another Transcendental argument buried in the text, although Taylor does not flag it as such. True to the Kantian spirit, it is an argument that as with moral space, so with moral time: human life is subject to the Transcendental condition that it be tellable as a narrative. The linearity of narrative provides the crucial uni-dimensionality – really uni-directionality – which Taylor’s exacting sense of hierarchy requires. He observes that this question of how we are moving in relation to the good – a question demanding a Yes/No answer – is the crucial link between identity and the notion of a worthwhile life. [Taylor *Sources of the Self*, 45] But again I find the

transcendental condition of narrativity too weak to deduce such a univocal moral structure. Taylor is seduced by his own metaphor, to imagine that because lived time is unidirectional we literally move though it towards or away from a moral good as well. Narratives of human lives, however, have more than one thread. Indeed, what makes them narratives rather than monosyllabic reports is precisely the weaving of dominant and recessive themes, on some of which we may see ourselves progressing while on others we perceive decline. Taylor's insistence on a Yes/No answer about direction of growth, to correspond with his hierarchical structure, serves to impoverish our moral experience just as he charges naturalism with doing". (p. 51-52)

Again Lane seems to misunderstand Taylor's deployment of a concept (in this case narrativity) and her critique misses the mark as a consequence. Taylor's insistence on the narrative nature of human self-understanding is aimed primarily at rebutting 'naturalist'²⁰ notions of the self, such as the 'punctual self' that has its origin in Locke's thought and which is taken up by Parfit and others.²¹ Against these reductionist versions of the self, Taylor argues that something crucial is left out of the picture, "a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story"²². This notion of narrative is not, per se, aimed at establishing the claim of structure, though it is perhaps illustrative of the existence of a moral space within which we orientate ourselves.

Leaving aside this second, secondary transcendental argument, I have thus far established that Taylor's Phenomenological argument and his Transcendental argument, if properly understood, withstand Lane's criticisms, and some progress has

therefore been made²³ in establishing the claim of morality and the claim of structure. I now move on to consider the Historical and Best account arguments.

5. The Historical and Best Account Arguments

Lane correctly recognises that Taylor understands History to have the effect of making moral sources less available. Here she compares Taylor with MacIntyre, who both recognise that the occluding influence of history has left moderns with a range of values, not all of which are easily reconcilable. “But whereas for MacIntyre these values, in the absence of the moral assumptions which give them meaning, are moral shards, for Taylor they are worthwhile and important values which are inextricably bound up with the modern self-concept. What they have lost, in losing their connection with the original sources, is the full force of moral power that they should possess ... Articulation is meant to hook up these values to sources and so to restore to us the full motivating force they should have, and once possessed.” (p. 54)

It is here that the Best Account principle has a role to play. Taylor describes this when he writes that:

The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or

metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense trumps.²⁴

So where Historical articulation is a process of seeking out the sources that empower the values that moderns find themselves inarticulately committed to, the Best Account principle provides the litmus test for what is discovered by that process. If what is discovered through the process of articulation leads to terms that ‘make best sense of us’ and cannot be replaced with ‘more clairvoyant substitutes’, then the moral sources thus discovered provide the Best Account of our moral experience.

Lane, however, is unconvinced that these strategies interact as successfully as Taylor would seem to have us believe. She sets up her criticism by pointing out how Taylor’s narrative shows that moral sources like the Romantic source of nature and the Homeric warrior ethic ‘lose their grip’ and ‘fade away’ as the ‘archaic culture’ that spawned them recedes into history (p. 54 – 55). History, then, leaves sources less available. On the other hand, according to Lane, Taylor is ‘emphatic’ that the work of Historical articulation tightens the grip ‘standards’ (or, probably better, commitments or values) have on us. She uses this point to establish a tension between

the idea that a source can lose its power for ... external historical reasons, and the idea that the most adequate source can always be identified by the Best Account. The question is in what sense articulation depends on availability. Taylor’s attempt to defeat relativism implies that the Best Account should not be handicapped by availability in the immediate culture, if it can find a source which is analytically adequate. But what if this most adequate and worthy

source is an idea several centuries old, already fallen into disuse for Historical reasons of social change? The best Account must be able to resurrect such sources if it is to be truly the best; but if it can do so, then History must be deprived of its role in determination of sources, if potential sources are not to be debarred due to accidental social unavailability. (p. 54 - 55)

The problem here is twofold: Lane's understanding of 'standards' and their relationship to articulation; and her misreading of the nature of Taylor's historical account. I will deal with the latter first.

Although Taylor's historical retrieval in *Sources of the Self* begins with an account of the unification or 'centring' of the moral self as it is articulated in Plato's work (which itself emerges from the Homeric warrior ethos, he describes this as the "prehistory of the story I want to tell"²⁵). The 'true' starting point for Taylor, therefore, is the work of Augustine, which he discusses in the chapter entitled 'In Interiore Homine'. This being the case, using the diminishing impact of the Homeric warrior ethic to illustrate her argument is a non-starter for Lane, for to use it thus is to ignore the shape and intent of Taylor's historical retrieval.

A better candidate, though ultimately unsuccessful, for establishing Lane's understanding of Taylor's historical account is the Romantic source of nature, which has clearly receded into history and no longer provides a clear-cut moral source for moderns. Romanticism is but one of the steps between Taylor's 'true' starting point of Augustine and the contemporary Western self. Lane is correct to recognise that Taylor's historical retrieval depicts the emergence and then recession of the Romantic

source of nature as part of what was, at the time, perceived as an error-reducing transition away from theism and towards contemporary secular morality. Lane has, however, missed the crucial argument that underlies Taylor's account. As Mulhall points out, Taylor's historical narrative

is also intended to establish that this perception [that "the cultural transition away from theism and towards secular moral sources occurred because it was perceived to be an emancipatory, illusion-destroying and so an error-reducing one"], however understandable it might have been at the time, was itself illusory – that this secularising transition really resulted in a variety of epistemic losses. This second strand of argument is manifest in Taylor's repeated emphasis upon the theistic roots of each of the three aspects of the modern identity that he delineates, and each of the two new frontiers of moral exploration that he identifies. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the ground-plan of his entire historical narrative is subordinate to establishing these points."²⁶

If Mulhall is right, and I believe that he is, then Lane has crucially misunderstood the nature of Taylor's historical articulation. Far from merely showing how moral sources have become occluded by the unfolding of history, Taylor's account is in fact a systematic counter to the epistemic loss that has occurred through time. In this sense, *Sources of the Self* is best read backwards²⁷.

It is at this point we need to deal with the other misunderstanding that leads to Lane's critique, her understanding of 'standards' and their relationship to articulation. Her

claim is that a problematic tension arises in Taylor's argument, in part due to the fact that he portrays standards as gaining increasing grip on us as a result of articulation. On the other hand, in Lane's understanding, Taylor depicts History as denying access to the sources that originally made sense of the standards we have been bequeathed. But there is a false separation in Lane's thought between 'standards' (which, tellingly, is not a term Taylor uses in his description of his explicit theory) and 'sources'. The intensification in commitment that Taylor argues emerges from articulation results *because* doing so 'reconnects' us with our moral sources. So the tension between 'intensification' and 'connection' in Lane's argument does not exist.

Furthermore, Taylor's own historical articulation, as I have argued above, is an argument that the 'Best Account' of the moral framework, at least for the Western self, is a theistic one. The very fact that Taylor's historical articulation *is* a retrieval, defeats Lane's objection about the relevant moral sources being unavailable to us.

An important part of Taylor's Historical argument that Lane neglects, is the role it plays in establishing the inescapability of hypergoods to moral frameworks. Hypergoods are "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about" (Taylor 1989, 63). Having started with the assertion that as human beings it is part of our makeup that we view the world through morality-coloured spectacles, Taylor then tries, through his historical retrieval, to show that "we cannot make sense of our moral life without something like a hypergood perspective, some notion of a good to which we can grow, and which then makes us see others differently"²⁸. In other words, not only is a moral outlook on life inescapable, but a hypergood perspective is

inescapably part of any moral outlook. Richard Rorty, for one, recognises that Taylor reads any philosophy that does not concede the existence of a hypergood as being in fact “parasitic on a hypergood which it refuses to acknowledge”²⁹.

6. Relativism, Theism and the Transcendental Argument

There remains, of course, the issue of relativism that Lane raises. Even if it could be shown that the Best Account of the Western self is a (Christian) theistic account, there is no guarantee that the same description best accounts for people whose identity is embedded in other, non-Western, cultures.

The answer here is the point I raised at the beginning of this paper, that it is erroneous to view the argument strategies deployed by Taylor in *Sources of the Self* as distinct, stand-alone arguments. Certainly, if Taylor’s Historical and Best Account arguments are considered separately from the Phenomenological and Transcendental arguments, then the issue of relativism remains unresolved. I propose, however, that the Historical and Best Account strategies can be understood as further steps in a single, comprehensive argument that is phenomenological at its base and transcendental in its structure.

In order to establish this comprehensive argument, it is necessary for us to remind ourselves of Taylor’s understanding of the nature of transcendental arguments. He writes that

The arguments I want to call “transcendental” start from some feature of our experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or the subject’s position in the world. They make this move by a regressive argument, to the effect that the stronger conclusion must be so if the indubitable fact about experience is to be possible (and being so, it must be possible).³⁰

We saw earlier that Taylor’s transcendental argument can be understood in its opening steps as taking the following form:

- (1) The nature of our experience is inescapably that of subjects;

- (2) It is essential to our manner of being as subjects that we perceive the world in moral terms, where “moral” encompasses all strong evaluations about the good life for humans;

- (3) The strong evaluations which are an inescapable part of our experience are themselves inescapably linked to goods, acquired through our webs of interlocution, which form the moral framework that centrally defines our identity.

The further steps that are added to this by the Historical and the Best Account arguments are as follows:

(4) Historical articulation reveals that it is an inescapable feature of moral frameworks that they be dominated by, and arranged by, a hypergood; and

(5) Historical articulation reveals that the Best Account of the hypergood-dominated inescapable moral framework that defines our identity is one defined in the terms of Christian theism.

The force of (5) becomes clear if we understand it as ‘the stronger conclusion’ of the transcendental argument that ‘must be so’ if the indubitable fact of (1) is to be possible. The claim, read progressively rather than regressively, is that we can make best sense of moral frameworks in the terms of Christian theism, but moral frameworks are indispensable to strong evaluations, and strong evaluations are an inescapable feature of our phenomenology.

If step (5) then can be shown to be correct, then relativism is soundly defeated – or at least, relativism is shown to be a poor fit with a fully-articulated phenomenology. Of course, Taylor’s historical retrieval may not, on its own, be sufficient to establish this point, and further investigation into this is required. Something like Pascal’s strategy that Gutting directed our attention to at the onset of this paper is probably required, and further consideration of the nature of Transcendental arguments is necessary. Again, this is an investigation that I must defer to a future paper.

7. Conclusion

It is now possible to return to Lane's overall critique. Contrary to what Lane has argued, I have shown that the Phenomenological argument succeeds in establishing claim i) that we must have a morality, and that the Transcendental argument succeeds in establishing claim (ii) that we must have a morality with a certain structure, such that particular values are connected to conceptions of the good, or 'sources'. Claim (iii) that we must have a morality based on an incomparably higher good (hypergood), is addressed by Taylor's Historical argument, though this aspect of the Historical argument is not addressed by Lane, and I have not been able to do more in this paper than mention this particular outcome of the Historical argument. Finally, while there is more work to be done in this regard, I also have shown that the Historical and Best Account arguments, combined together as parts of an over-arching Transcendental argument show genuine prospects in establishing claim (iv) that we must understand the incomparably higher good on which our morality must be based in the terms of (Christian) theism.

Notes

¹ This paper was first presented to a seminar hosted by the Centre for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame. I'd like to thank all those who participated for their comments, particularly Michael Rea, Tom Flint, Kelly Clarke and Alvin Plantinga. I'm also grateful to Nicholas Smith for reading an earlier version of this paper, and for his helpful insights. As always, however, any problems and difficulties that remain in this paper are there as a result of my own failings, and not those of my commentators.

² Gutting, Gary. *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*. Modern European Philosophy Series. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). pp. 129 – 130.

³ Gutting 1999, 149

⁴ George Marsden, “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture,” in Heft, J (ed.) *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press) pp. 84, 89.

⁵ Sami Pihlström “Pragmatic and Transcendental Arguments for Theism: a Critical Examination”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51(3): 195-214; Jun 2002.

⁶ Melissa Lane “God or Orienteering? A Critical Study of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*,” *Ratio*, 5 (1992) pp. 46-56. All unprefix page references refer to this work.

⁷ Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989). p 10.

⁸ I have argued elsewhere that a close reading of *Sources of the Self* reveals that only this interpretation prevents Taylor’s arguments against those he calls ‘naturalists’ from falling short of their mark (see Baker, D.P. 2000. “Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self: A transcendental apologetic?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47, pp. 155 – 174). Since writing that paper I have changed my position on the value of transcendental arguments.

⁹ Quentin Skinner, “Who are ‘We’? Ambiguities of the Modern Self”. *Inquiry*, 34, 1991. p 133. It’s worth noting that Taylor himself denied Skinner’s claim, and something of a debate developed between them on the topic. This debate is examined by William Greenway in his paper “Charles Taylor on Affirmation, Mutilation and

Theism: A Retrospective Reading of *Sources of the Self*,” *Journal of Religion*, 80, (2000) pp. 23-40.

¹⁰ Taylor 1989, 4

¹¹ Edmund Pincoffs, “Quandary Ethics” in Hauerwas, S & MacIntyre, A, eds. *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). pp. 92 – 112.

¹² Taylor 1989, 4

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981). p 2.

¹⁴ Taylor 1989, 32

¹⁵ As Nicholas Smith has pointed out to me, this makes Lane’s insistence on treating the phenomenological and the transcendental argument strategies as (even analytically) separable strategies particularly strange.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995). p 20.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991). pp. 34 – 5.

¹⁸ Taylor 1991, 33

¹⁹ I have set this argument out, in a slightly different form, in another paper (*Imago Dei: Towards a Transcendental Argument for the Existence of God*’, forthcoming 2003), in which I focus on the strong similarity between Taylor’s understanding of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental argument for embodied agency and this argument that is embedded in *Sources of the Self*. I have unpacked the exegetical aspects of this reading of *Sources of the Self* in another paper,

“Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: A Transcendental Apologetic?*,”
International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 2000, 47, pp. 155–174.

²⁰ Here I use ‘naturalist’ in the slightly non-standard way that Taylor deploys this term. My thanks to Alvin Plantinga for pointing out this non-standard usage to me. For more on what Taylor means by the term, see Nicholas Smith’s account in his *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002).

²¹ In an endnote Taylor writes that the thought experiments devised by Locke and Parfit “certainly alert us to necessary conditions of [the unity of a life]. But they fail altogether to engage with the narrative unity I have been talking about here. Suppose you criticised a movement of someone’s symphony as lacking thematic unity, and a philosophical discussion then ensued as to just what the unity of a movement consists in. Someone points out that you can’t have a unified piece if half the orchestra plays in Montreal and the other half in Toronto. True enough, we were taking performance in a single hall for granted; but if somebody thought that the unity we were talking about turned simply on such questions of spatial contiguity, he or she would have grievously missed the point. (Taylor 1989, 328 - endnote 38) I have discussed this aspect of Taylor’s philosophy in more detail in my paper ‘Taylor and Parfit on Personal Identity: a Response to Lötter’. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 1999, 18 (3), pp 331 - 346.

²² Taylor 1989, 48

²³ At least in the Popperian sense of progress. It is not my goal here to re-articulate all that Taylor advances in favour of his argument strategies, only to show that Lane’s criticisms do not undermine Taylor’s approach.

²⁴ Taylor 1989, 58

²⁵ Taylor 1989, 120

²⁶ Stephen Mulhall, “*Sources of the Self’s Senses of Itself*,” in Phillips, D.Z. (ed.) *Can Religion be Explained Away?* (Basingstoke, Hants. : Macmillan, 1996) pp. 142 – 143.

²⁷ I will argue this point fully in a forthcoming paper in which I will engage with Mulhall’s exposition of Taylor’s historical retrieval. It is my hope that I will convince the reader that Taylor’s argument is not merely theistic, but in an important sense Augustinian.

²⁸ Taylor 1989, 71

²⁹ Richard Rorty, “Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54, 1994. p. 197.

³⁰ Taylor 1995, 20