Hypergoods: Diagnosis, not Ontology

Daniel Blaikie

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Abstract

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The term 'hypergood' is ambiguous and short-lived in the work of Charles Taylor. This ambiguity is preserved in the secondary literature. I argue that a successful interpretation of the concept must be subject to three constraints, which I call the *reasoning, regress,* and *problem* constraints, respectively. My interpretation of the concept takes hypergoods to be contingent and reveals them as exemplary of much of what Taylor takes to be wrong with modern moral theory. Identifying the existence of hypergoods is thus a way of diagnosing an inadequate approach to moral life. The challenge is to preserve their force as moral sources without allowing them to dictate our meta-ethics and distort our moral predicament.

I would like to thank my parents, who have always encouraged my intellectual pursuits, and my wife, Janelle, without whom I may never even have started, let alone finished, this project. She has supported me in more ways than I can say.

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<u>Introduction</u>

The term 'hypergood' is a strange beast. Coined by Charles Taylor in the first part of his middle opus, *Sources of the Self*, the term disappears by the second part of that same book and does not reappear later in *Sources* or virtually any of Taylor's subsequent work. The short life of 'hypergood' stands out as an exception in Taylor's philosophy, as he tends to keep his terms of art in currency. So, for example, the term 'strong evaluation', a central theme in *Sources*, had already made its debut over ten years before the publication of *Sources*.[1] Further, strong evaluation reappears in Taylor's work after *Sources*, as does the idea of 'moral sources' which, like 'hypergood', seems to originate in that book. Even in his replies to critics of *Sources* who make use of the term 'hypergood', Taylor does not use it himself.[2]

The fate of the term may have been sealed by Taylor's own ambiguous stance toward hypergoods in the short forty-some pages throughout which he addresses them explicitly. On the one hand, hypergoods "are generally a source of conflict" (Taylor, *Sources* 64) and we must be on guard lest "our highest aspirations towards hypergoods . . . exact a price of self-mutilation" (*Sources* 106-7). On the other hand, over against his clear sympathy for Aristotle's ideal of balancing the demands of competing goods within a single life, Taylor muses that "perhaps we will find that we cannot make sense of our moral life without something like a hypergood perspective" (*Sources* 71). Moreover, what emerges clearly in his identification of modern hypergoods is the power they have to motivate and empower people to new moral heights. So hypergoods pose a problem for the modern self. They hold out the promise of great moral achievement and are also a

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[1] See Taylor, "Human Agency?"

[2] See, for example: Rorty, "Taylor on Truth" and Taylor, "Replies"; Rorty, "Self-Celebration," and Taylor, "Reply"; Rosen and Taylor, "Comments."

source of great conflict. But the question goes deeper. If hypergoods are an ineliminable feature of our moral lives, then the issue will simply be how to live with this tension. If, however, hypergoods are a contingent feature of our moral lives, then it may be possible to overcome the dangers of hypergoods while retaining their capacity to act as strong moral sources. On the key issue of where, or whether, hypergoods are meant to fit into his moral ontology, Taylor is unclear.

This ambiguity is carried into the secondary literature on Taylor's work. Unlike the notion of strong evaluation, which enjoys universal recognition as an important theme in Taylor's work, there is no apparent convention on the place or importance of hypergoods in Taylor's ontology. This is attested to by the fact that a number of reviewers assessing *Sources* opt to not even mention hypergoods in their discussion of the work and, among those who do, the use of the term is anything but uniform.[3] Sometimes it is taken for granted that everyone has a hypergood and that this is just the good they take to be most important in their lives. At other times, hypergoods are cast as having some further import than other goods for the possibility of assessing the objective validity of goods between people or between cultures. In some places it seems a person can only have one hypergood. In other places we read that some people may be trying to balance the claims of more than one hypergood that they recognize. Often the question of their place in Taylor's moral ontology is not discussed in any detail. Either it is taken for granted that we all must have one, in which case hypergoods enjoy some kind of ontological status, or, Taylor's own ambiguity on the matter is preserved in the

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[3] Examples of reviewers who do not mention hypergoods are: Shklar; Larmore; Schneewind; Nussbaum; MacIntyre, "Critical Remarks"; Olafson; Kymlicka, "Ethics"; Skinner; and Levy. Those who do mention the term will be discussed in more detail later on.

commentary. The argument has also been made that hypergoods are merely a contingent aspect of our moral lives.[4]

The added complication is that assessing the validity of these various interpretations of the concept 'hypergood' is not as simple as checking them against the primary text. As mentioned before, Taylor's own use of the term is ambiguous, and each of the interpretations in the secondary literature has some basis in the textual evidence. What I intend to do here is to situate the concept 'hypergood' within Taylor's project and try to show that, not only should we understand hypergoods as a contingent – though deeply rooted – aspect of the modern self, but that the hypergood concept is distinctively modern. Moreover, this feature of modern moral life drives the 'ethics of inarticulacy' of which Taylor is a strong critic.

In other words, what I want to say is that 'hypergood' is a diagnostic concept. It is meant to pick out an approach to moral life that proceeds by conferring privileged status to some set of goods, treating them as an altogether different kind of good and insulating them from having to compromise with the demands of other goods. The hypergood concept is a placeholder for any good which, when taken up in this way, produces a distorted picture of our moral life. This approach is important to diagnose, because the meta-ethical distortions it produces risk occluding what Taylor sees as the true task of moral life: balancing the competing demands of different goods over the course of a whole life.

A remark on terminology is in order at the outset. As I noted above, I will be arguing alongside Ruth Abbey that hypergoods are contingent. The contingency of

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[4] See: Abbey, *Philosophy Now*, where she argues that we have to understand hypergoods as being a contingent feature of the Taylorian self. So far as I can tell, she is the only one to have addressed this issue in detail.

hypergoods should be understood in contrast to the notion that they have ontological status. What makes a good a hypergood is the way we treat it in our practical deliberations, not a special property that they have over and above those of other goods. Goods in general do have ontological status, because they are necessary in order to make sense of what it is to be a person, human agent, or moral agent. Thus they have a place in Taylor's ontology of the self, or what I will simply be calling his moral ontology. What goes into the moral ontology must be perfectly general. It would be a feature of any possible human agent. To put it more classically, these features are the conditions for the possibility of human agency and Taylor establishes them by way of transcendental argument. That a person or culture has a hypergood is a fact, when it is a fact, that could have been otherwise. That this particular good, and not some other, counts as a hypergood for a person or culture could also have been otherwise. Arguments that a person or culture are oriented in relation to a hypergood will thus draw on the resources of history and social practices, whereas arguments for features of Taylor's moral ontology do not. It may be that hypergoods are real in a sense derived from Taylor's Best Account Principle, but they do not enjoy ontological status.[5]

I will proceed by first giving an overview of Taylor's moral ontology, in order to situate the question of where hypergoods fit in to the overall picture. Second, I will examine the secondary literature. If my contention is true, the challenge to delineating exactly the different interpretations of 'hypergood' in the literature is not merely quantitative. Taylor's own ambiguity with respect to the concept is for the most part

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[5] An analysis of these two kinds of argumentative strategy in Taylor's work, the Best Account strategy and the transcendental strategy, is beyond the scope of this project. What I am interested in here, however, is the strict question of ontology, not what I take to be the larger question in Taylor's work of what counts as real.

carried over into the commentary. For that reason I focus on those authors which have dealt in relatively more detail with the concept and try to articulate the interpretations of the term implicit in its various uses. Understanding the ways in which the existing interpretations of the concept fail will help to establish certain constraints on a successful interpretation of 'hypergood'. I call them the *reasoning, problem* and *regress* constraints, respectively. I will then show how my own interpretation meets these constraints and thereby succeeds as an interpretation of the concept. Finally I will entertain some objections, the responses to which I think shed some light on the nature of Taylor's political philosophy, especially his uneasy relationship with contemporary liberalism.

Chapter 1: Taylor's Moral Ontology

Nicholas Smith has noted that an unfortunate consequence of Taylor's association with philosophical hermeneutics is that it sometimes obscures the important influence twentieth-century phenomenology has had on his thinking, especially through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. ("Hermeneutic Tradition" 32) One of the central themes of that movement has been criticism of the foundations of science. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, argues that perception is our basic, pre-reflective means of encountering the world and that the theoretical reconstructions of perception in terms of the empiricist's 'sense data' or the Kantian categories (or some other suitably intellectualist strategy), while perhaps useful as themetizations for certain purposes, make perception out to be a process of reflective judgement and distort perception's basic nature as an engagement with the world. When we lose contact with this more basic experience of perception, we close ourselves off to ways of learning about the world. Only features of the world that count as valid input under the theory can be accepted as telling us something legitimate about the world. Everything else is either deliberately ignored, or simply goes unnoticed.

According to Taylor, this problem reproduces itself in the realm of our moral experience. Naturalist theories, for instance, rule out of court *a priori* any explanation that invokes entities or properties that cannot ultimately be cashed out in the language of physical science. Further, most of contemporary English-speaking moral philosophy rigidly defines the moral as being about our obligations to others and discounts questions that go beyond this consideration, like, for example, questions about what it is good to be. But in both cases, Taylor maintains, certain inarticulate, undefended presuppositions

inform the theory and put limits on what can count as elements in an explanation of our moral lives.

Taylor addresses himself to a naturalism that assumes the ultimate order of explanation for every phenomenon must be articulable in physical terms alone. So subject-dependent properties like value have to be purged from the last analysis of our moral lives by showing what natural phenomena we are pointing to when we use the language of value. We learn about the physical world through the information afforded us by our senses. This position takes the apparent givenness of sensory information for granted and uses it as the beginning point of its science, rather than starting with the question of what, if any, conditions are necessary for the possibility of such data. Taylor is obviously not neutral on the issue. He believes that a close analysis of perception, as exemplified by Merleau-Ponty, shows that perceiving the world is a kind of meaningful engagement with it. 'Sense data' accounts of perception are theoretical abstractions from this basic form of perception and err insofar as they take their own theoretical achievement to be the unproblematic building blocks for a science of perception. But the important point here is that starting with a preconceived notion of what the ultimate terms of our theory will be misses the methodological point, especially important with respect to our moral experience, that it "would have to be establish[ed] *a posteriori* that such an absolute account of human life was possible and illuminating before we could draw conclusions about what is real, or know even how to set up the distinction objective/subjective." (Taylor, "Diversity" 243) The spirit of scientific inquiry, in its broad and proper sense, demands that we be open to the possibility that the best possible

explanation of a phenomenon under investigation may demand the addition of new entities to our ontology.

The parallel exigency of the scientific spirit in moral philosophy is that we be prepared to accept that what we thought was most valuable or important, turns out to be less valuable or important than we thought. Taylor sees contemporary English-speaking moral theory as taking certain intuitions about what we owe to each other as its given, unproblematic starting point, just as he sees many naturalist theories taking sense data as their obvious, unchallengeable beginning. Just as the problem with the naturalist theories is not that we do not have experiences of red triangles, the problem in contemporary moral philosophy is not that we do not have strong intuitions about how we ought to treat each other. The problem comes when we take these experiences as unchallengeable starting points without interrogating their credentials. Just as sense data turns out to be one theoretical construal of a more basic phenomenon of perception, so do the intuitions that constitute the bounds of contemporary moral theory turn out to be particular determinations of a more general capacity to make qualitative discriminations based on our allegiance to some one or more goods. But then an important question for moral theory becomes why certain considerations, say those of equality, should be designated 'moral' and be taken to trump other goods whenever their respective demands conflict, and it is exactly these kinds of questions that Taylor thinks contemporary moral philosophy as it stands is unable to answer. It cannot answer them because it would require putting in question – even if only to later redeem – the credentials of the starting point of the theory. As this is not an option for such theories as they do not see that even

our most deeply held convictions "stand in need of justification like the others." (Taylor, "Diversity" 233) The question cannot even be formulated in their terms.

Taylor is not without ideas as to why contemporary moral philosophy has developed its peculiarly "cramped and truncated view of morality in a narrow sense" (Taylor, *Sources* 3), but the important point here is what his critique of contemporary moral philosophy means for the starting point of his own investigation of our moral lives.[6] What it means is that, although Taylor thinks our experience of the moral can be the only starting point for such an investigation, he is not content to take certain of our moral intuitions as unchallengeable building blocks for an account of our moral lives. Rather, the challenge will be to start with some such experiences and then try to see what can be said about them, working backwards, as it were, before working forward. This project has two components. In the first place, Taylor is interested in describing the basic features of any possible experience of the moral. It is the findings of this general investigation that I will refer to as Taylor's moral ontology, but it might as easily be called an ontology of selfhood. They should apply to every person, in every culture.

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[6] Taylor charges that English-speaking moral theory typically takes one kind of moral intuition as basic and casts it as "somehow self-evident, or even . . . [as] not based on ethical insight at all but on something firmer, like the logic of our language." (Taylor, "Diversity" 233)This move is taken by Taylor to be motivated by a belief that the question of why we value some goods more than others is rationally inarbitrable. The strategy is for "those who despair of reason as the arbiter of moral disputes . . . [and] has seemed a way of avoiding a moral scepticism which was both implausible and distasteful." (Taylor, "Diversity" 241)

Kymlicka provides some evidence for this view when he argues with Ronald Dworkin that all contemporary political philosophy begins from an 'egalitarian plateau'. What this means is that "every plausible political theory has the same ultimate value, which is equality" and this in the sense that they all "require that the government treat its citizens with equal consideration; each citizen is entitled to equal concern and respect." (Kymlicka, *Political Philosophy* 3-4) He tells us that one reason to hope for the success of the argument is that "then the scepticism many people feel about the possibility of rationally resolving debates between theories of justice may be misplaced, or, at any rate, too hasty." (Kymlicka, *Political Philosophy* 4) Too hasty not because the possibility of mediating substantive conflicts between the demands of competing goods will have been demonstrated, but because it will have been shown that everyone already agrees that the demands of equality should trump those of other goods and the disagreements in political theory are merely about how best to do that, not whether to do that. In other words, the issue of substantive conflicts between goods will be avoidable.

Anyone who did not have the features picked out by the general ontology would have to be understood as "stepping outside what we could recognize as . . . undamaged human personhood." (Taylor, *Sources* 27) Taylor's argumentative strategy for establishing these features of selfhood are largely transcendental. They are to be understood as the very conditions of human personhood, without which we cannot make sense of our lives *qua* selves.

On the other hand, Taylor is interested in explaining the contingent features of selves in the modern West, understood as a particular development of the basic ontological framework. The features peculiar to the modern self described by Taylor are contingent. They could have developed differently had the history of Western civilization taken a different turn. The argumentative strategy here is genealogical and occupies the greater part of *Sources*. Though conceptually speaking the difference between these two approaches is clear cut, Nicholas Smith has nicely pointed out the risk of this two-pronged approach:

> The danger is that one will slide into the other. One possible outcome of such a slide is the presentation of a general human capacity in a more substantive form than the minimal ontology warrants. Another is the presentation of norms derived from such culturally embellished capacities as if they were universal. (*Charles Taylor* 102)

Indeed, there are commentators who charge that Taylor is guilty of just such a slide.[7] I think this tension in Taylor's work plays an important role in explaining the ambiguity surrounding the status of hypergoods in Taylor's thought and I will return to it later when explaining how it is that I think we should interpret this concept.

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[7] See for instance Smith, *Charles Taylor* for an argument against the generality of narrative identity and Laitinen, who argues that Taylor's argument for the indispensability of moral sources fails.

For now I would like to outline the features of Taylor's moral ontology that I think are relevant to a detailed discussion of hypergoods. As mentioned above, these features are established by Taylor through a process of transcendental argumentation. Taylor characterizes transcendental arguments as "chains of apodictic indispensability claims which concern experience and thus have an unchallengeable anchoring." ("Validity" 28) That which gives them their force is their beginning from some indubitable aspect of our experience. To deny the experience would at best be a confusion, at worst an absurdity. From its undeniable beginning in experience the argument moves to a stronger conclusion, on the basis that the aspect of experience picked out by the first claim could not be possible except for the condition contained in the stronger claim. In this way a "chain" of at least two – though possibly more – indispensability claims is established. The claims of transcendental arguments are apodictic (if the argument goes through) because their justification is not empirical, it is a priori. The later claims in the argument enjoy logical priority over the former claims. Insofar as transcendental arguments aim to articulate something about "the activity of our being aware of our world, grasping the reality in which we are set," (Taylor, "Validity" 30) they elaborate preconditions, or presuppositions, of our experience. They can do this because engaging in an activity is to have some sense – albeit perhaps only implicitly – of what it would be like to fail in that activity. By making the criteria for failure explicit, the stronger claims in transcendental arguments articulate the conditions for the possibility of the experience.

One of Taylor's first arguments begins from the fact that each of us, in some yet to be defined sense, has an identity, and moves from there to establish a capacity to make

qualitative distinctions. The formulation of a person's identity can be understood as an answer to the question Who am I? But this question asks for more than my name, or my family tree. To say who I am involves saying what I am committed to, what people and groups I identify with, and through these, what kinds of things I think are valuable. In other words, "[t]o know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand." (Taylor, *Sources* 27) To be committed to some things, however, is to *not* be committed to others. In order to know where I stand, I have to be able to recognize some actions, associations or ways of life as better or worse than others.

Taylor uses a spatial metaphor to flesh out the point: "To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary." (*Sources* 28) To have an identity – as a Habs fan, a socialist or a Christian, for example – just is to know where you stand on the issues raised by these questions. Perhaps it could happen that one loses all such identifications without assuming any others, but Taylor thinks such a person is the kind we would recognize as suffering an 'identity crisis'. The fact that in cases of extreme identity crisis – or "narcissistic personality disorder" – "patients show signs of spatial disorientation as well at moments of acute crisis" demonstrates how "[t]he disorientation and uncertainty about where one stands as a person seems to spill over into a loss of grip on one's stance in physical space." (Taylor, *Sources* 28) Having an identity is essential to our normal functioning, and the ability to make qualitative distinctions is in turn necessary for the constitution of an identity.

Furthermore, the recognition of qualitative distinctions entails the recognition of some one or more goods. In order to distinguish between better and worse, higher or lower, noble or base, alternatives, one must have a conception of the Good, or more modestly *a* good, in relation to which this distinction can be made. It is in articulating the good of, say, courage, that we begin to formulate some criterion or criteria according to which an act may count as courageous or cowardly. So goods ground the qualitative distinctions that constitute our identities, and that is why orientation to the Good can be seen as an indispensable feature of identity. Some goods, however, may play a more important role with respect to our identities than others. Taylor distinguishes four kinds of goods: life goods, constitutive goods, moral sources and hypergoods. Life goods are "the kinds of thing which are captured in notions of the good life." ("Comments and Replies" 243) In other words, they are those things I want to have or states of affairs I want to obtain because I see them as being an important part of the good life.

Life goods might include things as various as having the nicest car on the block or dedicating my life to missionary work. What makes them good is their relation to an idea of what it is good to be. Taylor sees this latter as being defined for a person by "features of the universe, or God, or human beings, (i) on which the life goods depend, (ii) which command our moral awe or allegiance, and (iii) the contemplation of or contact with which empowers us to be good." ("Comments and Replies" 243) These features of the universe, God, or human beings are constitutive goods, and even while they define the contours of the good life, they can also be components of it. Living in a fair and equal relationship to one's fellow humans may at once give shape to the good life, giving value to certain life goods, and at the same time figure as a part of that life itself in the sense

that it must be worked into the good life in such a way as to respect the claims of other goods. Moral sources are those constitutive goods which realize (iii); contemplation of or contact with them motivates us to live up to their demands. I will return later to the question of where hypergoods fit in to the picture.

The ability to recognize goods, to make qualitative distinctions, is what Taylor calls 'strong evaluation' and is a cornerstone of his moral ontology. The concept is defined contrastively against another of Taylor's terms of art, 'weak evaluation'. In a weak evaluation, the evaluator is presented with a choice between two or more alternatives, say whether to snack on salty or sweet foods this evening. The choice presents itself due to the contingent incompatibility of the alternatives. For some reason or another, I cannot have both salty and sweet foods tonight; for instance, I am on a strict caloric diet, or I had a big supper and so only want a small snack, or I happen to hate having both salty and sweet flavours in my mouth at the same time. The ultimate criterion for choosing between the alternatives in such an evaluation just is my desires. If tonight I want a salty snack more than a sweet one, then that is sufficient to justify the salty snack as the right choice.

It may be that I have something to say about the desirability of the alternatives, that I can articulate what about each of the alternatives I find attractive. To use one of Taylor's own examples, I may be planning a vacation and considering going either north or south.[8] A northern vacation promises a rugged, adventuresome experience while vacationing in the south offers a warm, relaxing escape from my otherwise fast-paced life. Articulating the desirable characteristics of the one vacation does nothing to

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[8] The example is taken from the essay in which Taylor first introduces the term 'strong evaluation'. See Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?"

diminish the desirability of the other. There is nothing incompatible between enjoying rugged adventure and warm relaxation. At most, articulating what I find attractive about each alternative serves as a way of calling my desires up in order to assess their relative strength. Upon reflection I may prefer the idea of a relaxing vacation this year, but leave it open as to whether or not I'll take the rugged adventure trip during next year's vacation.

Weak evaluations are undertaken all the time by both humans and animals. Strong evaluation, however, is something not available to other animals and essential to what it means to be human. A strong evaluation consists of two parts. On the one hand, there is something akin to a gut reaction. One might feel a strong sense of disgust, for example, upon witnessing an act of extraordinary cowardice. On the other hand, strong evaluations are susceptible to articulation in a way that weak evaluations are not. Imagine a soldier who betrays his comrades to the enemy in the middle of the night. They see this as an act of treachery and cowardice. He has sold out his friends on the false belief that the enemy is days from victory and a cowardly desire to preserve his life above all else. The soldier in question, however, thinks his friends have been blinded by their patriotism from seeing their imminent defeat and hopes to save them by throwing them at the mercy of the enemy, surrendering before the final gory battle. It is a feature of strong evaluation that characterizing the desirability of one alternative involves at the same time portraying the other alternative as undesirable. Unlike in a weak evaluation, the alternatives here are *necessarily*, not contingently, incompatible. The soldier's friends would rather fight to the bitter end than spare their lives through surrender because they hold dying for their country to be a more noble way of being than living under the rule of the enemy.

Articulating what it is that makes staying and fighting worthwhile is at once to say why abandoning the fight is a cowardly, contemptible act.

So, in a strong evaluation, the alternatives are necessarily incompatible and have the added characteristic of in some sense deserving a certain response. Another way of putting this is to say that the distinctions drawn between the alternatives are qualitative, as opposed to merely quantitative, distinctions. At issue in a strong evaluation is not simply which alternative I desire most, but which alternative is deserving of my desire; which alternative is more noble or base, good or bad, higher or lower, etc.. Here, the ultimate criterion is not my own desires, but certain goods in relation to which the alternatives stand and are qualitatively described.[9] Therefore, in strong evaluations, articulation serves for more than merely summoning my desires to the surface to assess their relative strength. Rather, articulation serves to reveal the relationship between a given alternative and a particular good or set of goods.

Beyond this, articulation serves a further two purposes. The first of these is motivational. Granted that we do not perceive goods in the same way that we perceive tables and chairs, articulation is the way that we bring our initially vague, inchoate strong evaluation into a clearer, more determinate perception of the good or goods at issue in a particular situation. For Taylor, this kind of "articulation is a necessary condition of adhesion; without it, these goods are not even options." (*Sources* 91) Perspicuously grasping a good through articulation can potentially open us up to that good in ways that we were not open to it before. A new found love of that good can inspire us to new heights of accomplishment in respect of that good, or at least the good may exert a new

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[9] This presupposes that goods aren't just a certain kind of desire. To address the substantive issue is beyond the scope of this project. It is sufficient for my purposes that Taylor does not take this to be the case.

power over us once we see how it is good and what it demands of us: "The central notion here is that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power." (Taylor, *Sources* 92) So articulacy about the goods inherent in strong evaluations does not only help decide between two or more alternatives, the right articulation of the goods involved in a situation may (although it does not necessarily) also help motivate us to work toward what we judge the better alternative.

Articulation also serves, however, as a starting point for criticism. Just as an unarticulated strong evaluation[10], left at the level of a gut reaction, hinders our ability to affirm the goods that subtend the evaluation, so does it hinder our ability to subject the evaluation to critique. Once we get out into the open what good or goods are responsible for a given alternative's attractiveness, we can ask whether that good really is a good that we affirm, and even in the case that it is, whether the alternative in question is the best way to realize that good.

Of course, none of this answers the question as to where these goods in relation to which we evaluate alternatives come from. How do we come to adopt those goods which ground that qualitative distinctions central to our identity? For Taylor we inherit a whole set of goods when we first learn a language; we are inducted into a tradition. The idea of tradition here is meant not only as a way of thinking about the world, but also as a set of practices; that is, ways of relating to the world and the people in it. Thus, along with a language comes a tradition with a whole set of prejudices, in the sense of pre-judgments, about the way things are and how one should behave that are already at work in our experience as we perceive and act in the world. The encoding of these prejudices in our practices means that we do not receive them through an explicit process of handing

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[10] Though it must be said, no strong evaluation is inarticulable in principle.

down, they are passed inarticulately through the processes of socialization and language learning. Included among the prejudices are the goods which served as the original point of the practice in question. The goods and prejudices embedded in our practices provide a background framework of meaning against which the things and people we encounter have meaning for us. This meaningful background is the space mapped out by the qualitative distinctions which we described earlier, the space in which we situate our identity. Things and people have meaning for us insofar as we can place them in relation to this meaningful background.

This is not to say that the meaningful continuity of our background framework cannot be interrupted. Indeed, this sort of disruption is exactly the starting point for hermeneutical reflection and potentially for modifying some of the background framework. The important point here is that any language-animal already comes with a framework of meaning, and therefore also a set of goods which animate its practices and to which it already – whether explicitly or not – practically claims allegiance. So we come to know and commit ourselves to the goods which inform our strong evaluations as we learn a language. This does not mean that those goods cannot themselves be subject to evaluation and change – as we saw above, one of the important roles of articulation is to enable such a critical process – but it does mean that we do not first seek out basic moral principles from a neutral standpoint and only begin our lives as strong evaluators once we have settled which goods we will affirm and their order of priority. By having some basic mastery of a language, we are already inducted into the moral realm and already affirm some goods in practice.

Chapter 2: Constraints on a Successful Interpretation of the Hypergood Concept

It is against the background of this moral ontology that we have to make sense of the term hypergood. With life goods, constitutive goods and moral sources, Taylor's taxonomy of goods is perhaps already rich enough to offend against the Quinean ontologist's taste for desert landscapes, but we now have to ask whether or not the hypergood should be added to this list. Rather than going directly to Taylor on this question, however, I think it will be more helpful to canvass the secondary literature first. In so doing, we will see that there are not only a number of different ways to interpret the place of hypergoods in Taylor's system, but that virtually none of them are unsupported by Taylor's claims in *Sources*. For that reason, there is no obvious, uncontestable characterization of hypergoods in Taylor's work. An adequate account of what Taylor hoped to capture with the concept of hypergood must be the aim, not the starting point, of our investigation.

I mentioned in the introduction that there were a number of reviewers of *Sources* that did not feel the need to mention, let alone address, the hypergood concept in their discussion of the work. Since then there have even been some articles that set themselves the task of discussing Taylor's moral philosophy in detail that do not mention the term.[11] For obvious reasons, I will not have much to say about these commentators' take on hypergoods. But before hastening on, I do think it bears mentioning that their omissions may be interpreted as lending weight to the notion that hypergoods are not a central feature of the Taylorian moral ontology. This consideration is by no means decisive in and of itself, but I take it to strengthen the independent case I will be mounting later on

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[11] See, for example: Sibley; Kerr; Weinstock; Smith, "Contingency"; and Löw-Beer. The term 'hypergood' is mentioned in a quote Löw-Beer takes from *Sources*, but he does not himself use the term, nor does he make it an object of discussion.

that hypergoods should not be seen as figuring in Taylorian *ontology* at all, although they do have a central place in his reflections on modernity.

By now it has become a familiar refrain that I think there is a grievous lack of uniformity in the use of the term hypergood, both in the secondary literature as well as in *Sources* itself. The difficulty of trying to identify the interpretive approaches in the literature is compounded by the fact that in some cases the term 'hypergood' is deployed without being taken up thematically or even properly introduced. [12] Even in some cases where the author expands upon the concept, there are ambiguities that remain. So my approach will be to articulate possible interpretations of 'hypergoods' that I think emerge in the literature, accepting that determinately assigning any one commentator to a particular interpretation may prove an elusive task. Indeed, Taylor himself is no exception. Looking at the possible ways we can make sense of the use of 'hypergood' in the literature, and the interpretive challenges they raise, will help establish interpretive constraints that a successful interpretation of the concept will have to observe.

Let us begin by tackling head-on what I take to be the central issue in interpreting hypergoods: the question of whether they enjoy ontological, or merely contingent, status in Taylor's work. On this question we have the benefit of one of the most sustained critical treatments of hypergoods, a section of Ruth Abbey's *Charles Taylor*. Pointing to the text, Abbey notes that Taylor's introduction of hypergoods is a qualified one. For instance, in introducing the term he tells us that:

> Each of the goods I am talking about here is defined in a qualitative contrast, but *some people* live according to a higher-order contrast between such goods as well. (. . .) *For those with a strong commitment to such a good*, what it means is that this above all others provides the

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[12] Examples of instances such as these are Razuka-Szuszcsewski; Rosen; Rorty, "Taylor on Truth"; Rorty, "Review".

landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives. (*Sources* 62, emphasis added)

Further on he says:

While all the goods I recognize, however much they may admit of lesser or greater attainment, allow for a yes/no question concerning the direction of my life in relation to them, *if* I am strongly committed to a highest good in this sense I find the corresponding yes/no question utterly decisive for what I am as a person. *For people who understand their lives this way*, there is a qualitative discontinuity between this one good and the others; it is incomparably above them[.] (*Sources* 63, emphasis added)

And later:

Hypergoods are understood *by those who espouse them* as a step to a higher moral consciousness. (*Sources* 64, emphasis added)

However, Abbey notices that a shift occurs during Taylor's discussion of hypergoods and "they imperceptibly become necessary properties of moral life." (*Philosophy Now* 36) Speaking of hypergoods, Taylor says that "it would appear that we all recognize some such." (*Sources* 63) and goes on to say:

[P]erhaps we will find 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. (*Sources* 71)

By the end of *Sources'* first part, Taylor is telling us that "[w]e have to search for a way in which our strongest aspirations towards hypergoods do not exact a price of self-mutilation." (*Sources* 106-7) Abbey takes it that "[w]ith this move, hypergoods seem to have become a feature of all people's moral lives." (*Philosophy Now* 37) Many commentators cope with this ambiguity in *Sources* by simply reproducing it themselves.

The method by which this is done is pretty consistent. The first step in the process is to include, somewhere in close proximity to the first use of 'hypergood', a small phrase that puts a qualification on the scope of hypergoods. For instance, Michael Rosen tells us

that: "Not all goods are equal in status. Some goods (*for some people at least*) are recognized as being of overriding importance" (185, emphasis added) and Brain Braman explains that: "*For most of us* there is usually one highest good that orients and ranks all other goods." (39, emphasis added)[13] The second step is to move on and simply talk about hypergoods as if we all had one (or more) without ever mentioning again the curious few who may not have a hypergood and their possible implications for our understanding of the concept. A second strategy, less often deployed, is to jump straight away to step two, but include a footnote referencing Ruth Abbey's contention that hypergoods may only be a contingent feature of our moral lives.[14]

Abbey argues that the role of hypergoods is in part to "go some way to mitigating pluralism, for they provide a way for individuals to rank-order their goods" (*Philosophy Now* 36) and they must therefore be seen as a contingent feature of our moral ontology. For otherwise, we would find that "the challenges of pluralism would not be as piquant as Taylor frequently suggests they are." (Abbey, *Philosophy Now* 37) Moreover, she believes there is a phenomenological consideration that speaks to the contingency of hypergoods, namely, that "many people do live their lives devoid of any sense of such a preponderant good." (*Philosophy Now* 37) Ultimately, I think, Abbey is right. However, there is a lot left unsaid in her analysis of the concept. We are left without answers to questions like: If not an ontologically distinct set of goods, what exactly are hypergoods? If 'hypergood' is just shorthand for '*really* important good to someone', then why the need to coin a whole new term? And moreover, how could simple shorthand come so close to being ontologized, even in Taylor's own work? In other words, something more

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[13] See also: Clark; Gutting 113-162; and Smith, *Charles Taylor* 116.
[14] This is the approach adopted by Laitinen and Blattberg.

is needed than the determination that hypergoods should be seen as "contingent, rather than essential, elements of moral frameworks." (Abbey, *Philosophy Now* 37) We need an interpretation of the concept that explains what phenomenon Taylor was trying to pick out with the term 'hypergood' and its importance.

Rather than tackling this problem head-on, Deane-Peter Baker tries to avoid it by identifying hypergoods with constitutive goods. Baker thinks it telling that constitutive goods are only mentioned once in Part I of *Sources* and finds it "hard to see just what the difference is between the function of hypergoods and constitutive goods." (118) The very project of offering an ontological account of our moral lives must include a means of ordering life goods and so the addition of a further tier over and above life and constitutive goods "is an unnecessary over-elaboration." (Baker 119) Baker thinks this interpretation has the advantage of "erasing another area of uncertainty in Taylor-interpretation, namely the question of whether or not all frameworks contain a hypergood." (119) For, while there is ambiguity in Taylor's work about whether we all have a hypergood, he is very clear that everyone claims allegiance, implicitly or explicitly, to some constitutive good. If hyper- and constitutive goods are the same thing, then the issue is resolved.

This solution, however, raises more problems than it solves. One such problem is making sense of why Taylor would coin two terms for the same phenomenon in the same book, without making it clear that he is doing so and the reasons why. A further problem is the following: we are meant to take the fact that Taylor opted to use the term 'hypergood' instead of 'constitutive good' in the first part of *Sources*, "where every other major structural part of Taylor's understanding of morality is explored in depth," (Baker

118) as a reason for identifying the two apparent kinds of good. However, this makes all the more puzzling the fact that the term hypergood does not appear in any of Taylor's subsequent work, especially when he does go on to talk explicitly about constitutive goods. Baker does not say what might explain Taylor's sudden and persistent change of terminological preference. Third, if hypergoods and constitutive goods are identical, it is not clear why constitutive goods, both in *Sources* and in later work, are treated as a more or less unproblematic feature his moral ontology, when in *Sources* Taylor obviously takes hypergoods to pose difficulties for his moral ontology and is at pains to address them. He thus explicitly moves to "pursue further the nature of 'hypergoods' and the difficulties they pose for the thesis I've been developing." (Taylor, *Sources* 64) This is an issue which I argue below is central to a successful interpretation of the concept. Moreover, when Baker goes on to treat other Taylor-interpreters as if they too make this identification he ends up misunderstanding both Taylor and his critics.[15] Finally, we might ask what Baker has to say in response to a commentator like Jane Forsey, who identifies the important motivational component of hypergoods, pointing out that they "operate as a "moral source"." (Forsey 299-300) Given the motivational aspect of hypergoods, would it not be better to identify them with moral sources rather than the more general category of constitutive goods? Ultimately, I think not, but only because this strategy will meet with the same objections raised against the more general one. While it may be tempting to sweep some vexing questions about hypergoods aside by

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[15] See, for example, his discussion of Gary Gutting. Baker 153-4.

identifying them with constitutive goods, we can do also only at the cost of failing to see what Taylor was trying to pick out by coining the term.[16]

A good place to start getting at the answer is with ontological interpretations of the concept. Seeing the problems they generate will serve as a way to put us on the right path. The salient feature of what I'm calling the 'ontological interpretations' of hypergoods is that they all in some way relate hypergoods to the possibility of moral objectivity. They are particularly impressed by passages in *Sources* like the following:

> The highest good is not only ranked above the other recognized goods of the society; it can in some cases challenge and reject them, as the principle of equal respect has been doing to the goods and virtues connected with traditional family life (...) To have a hypergood arise by superseding earlier views is to bring about (or undergo) what Nietzsche called a 'transvaluation of values'. The new highest good is not only erected as a standard by which other, ordinary goods are judged but often radically alters our view of their value, in some cases taking what was previously an ideal and branding it a temptation. (*Sources* 65)

Or this passage:

> But the moral outlook makes wider claims [than those restricted to a particular culture], and this by its very nature. For it engenders a pitiless criticism of all those beliefs and practices within our society which fail to meet the standard of universal respect. . . . It is hard to see why this critical radicalism should suddenly fail when we get to the boundaries of our society[.] (*Sources* 67-8)

In the case of Gary Gutting, the objectivity of value in Taylor's work is a kind of 'phenomenological objectivity'. He describes this kind of objectivity in the following terms:

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[16] Mark Redhead seems to pursue the similar but even less satisfactory strategy of identifying hypergoods with life goods when he says that: "Taylor's specific account of modernity is built upon the concepts of "life goods" (or "hypergoods"), which Taylor depicts as being at the center of any strong evaluation." (Redhead 178) This is strange given that the importance for identity formation Taylor assigns to constitutive goods and the motivational importance accorded to moral sources seem also to be a feature of hypergoods. Moreover, life goods do not pose any kind of problem for Taylor's philosophy.

> [T]here could be practices that do not exist from the absolute standpoint, since only those with desires sufficiently similar to those that constitute the practices could make any sense of them. Nevertheless, there would be ethical values associated with the practices, and these values would be objective in the sense of being independent of our desires. (150)

The idea is that goods depend upon human beings (or beings sufficiently like humans in the appropriate respects) in the sense that were those beings to cease to exist tomorrow, there would not be anything like 'courage' or 'benevolence' still left in the world. This contrasts with the sense in which we might think that were there suddenly no people on earth, there would still be rocks and trees. That said, however, this does not in and of itself entail that we are able, in our lives as agents, to understand the goods that structure our identity as merely issuing from our desires. From the point of view of us living our lives, we experience the goods that matter to us as making claims on us that are independent of our desires and in this sense what is good is not a 'subjective' matter. Moreover, our moral experience takes us one step further, and "presents us with values independent not only of our individual beliefs and desires but also of the constituting beliefs of our own and others' culture." (Gutting 150) These values, according to Gutting, are what Taylor is designating with the term 'hypergood'. Unlike other goods, hypergoods lay claim to transcultural objectivity.

Gutting objects to the notion of hypergoods, so defined. Though some of his objections broach topics that there is not space enough to deal with here, there is one objection in particular that is of interest for our purposes.[17] That objection disputes the phenomenological evidence, insisting that:

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[17] These objections are concerned with the extent to which the first-person perspective should be privileged in moral theorizing and the possibility of first-person accounts defeating ethical naturalism.

> [M]any modern people are acutely aware of the existence of alternative moral perspectives and of the plausibility of psychological and sociological accounts of the contingent origin of these perspectives. Even spontaneous self-reports of their moral viewpoints often show an unwillingness to absolutize moral claims. (Gutting 151)

Continuing along these same line further on, he says:

> It is much more likely that many of us will come up with no firm conclusion about the applicability of our values outside their ordinary social domain. Even among those who do conclude something definite, we should expect that some will endorse hypergoods and some will not, and that, even among the former, there will be disagreement about which values are hypergoods. The result will, at best, not be the establishment of the reality of hypergoods as a firm truth but as an opinion some of us are entitled to hold on the basis of our own personal experience. It is, therefore, unlikely that we will find that hypergoods are phenomenologically objective. (152)

There are two important things to note about this objection. The first is that it is an objection to the idea that hypergoods have an ontological status; that they are a universal, indispensable feature of the moral condition and different in kind than other goods. If we do not think Taylor is advancing an ontological interpretation of hypergoods, then the objection is unmotivated. While Gutting recognizes that this may be the case, as "Taylor might well agree that the existence of hypergoods is not a foregone conclusion" (151), he does not discuss the point or its implications any further than that. The second thing to note before moving on is Gutting's contention that there is something in particular about the modern moral experience that speaks against the ontological status he takes Taylor to be claiming for hypergoods. This is interesting in light of the fact, which I will argue later, that Taylor takes hypergoods to be characteristic of modernity. The term 'hypergood' is intended to name a feature of moral experience present above all in our modern age. I will return to this aspect of hypergoods in the next section.

Though these are interesting and important issues, I am interested here in the question of what Taylor means by the term 'hypergood' in the context of his own work.

For Arto Laitinen as well, the hypergood concept gains its importance from questions concerning the objectivity of value. The question of hypergoods arises when we ask whether, "[g]iven the wide range of genuine but incompatible goods, can the choice between them . . . be rational?" (Laitinen 196) This question is then assimilated to the question of whether or not it is possible to rank goods according to their relative importance. And as Taylor's answer to this question is a "qualified yes", we can say that "[t]here are further qualitative discontinuities within the field of strong evaluations, some goods are more important than others." (Laitinen, 197) These goods are hypergoods, and they entail that "although there is a diversity of goods, they can form a more or less well-ordered unity." (Laitinen 198) Laitinen's textual evidence for this claim comes from an essay by Taylor in which he claims:

> The domain of ultimately important goods has a sort of prescriptive unity. Each of us has to answer all these demands in the course of a single life, and this means that we have to find some way of assessing their relative validity, or putting them in an order of priority. A single coherent order of goods is . . . something we always try to define without ever managing to achieve it definitively. (Taylor, "Diversity" 244)

The gloss on hypergoods becomes more complicated with Laitinen's analysis of this text. He sees in the passage above a 'universal, descriptive' claim and a prescriptive claim. The former consists in the idea that "the different goods will find their contingent places within every life, whether or not this is intended. . . . But more strongly, it seems that people in fact do have more or less stable hierarchies among their conceptions of the good." (Laitinen 198) The prescriptive claim is that "we ought to try and define the normative order of goods." (Laitinen 198) Moreover, this task divides into two projects. The first is the "extensional" project of trying to find the relative place of each good in a single, particular life. This requires that we weigh the goods in question against each

other to determine their relative strength. The "intensional" project is that of dissolving apparent conflicts between goods, showing that they "are not really opposed to each other in what their real content: true equality and true liberty presuppose each other[.]" (Laitinen 198) The question is where to locate hypergoods within this broad project.

One place to locate them is within the purview of the descriptive claim. As a matter of fact people do to some extent order the goods in their lives, hypergoods being the ones that just are more valued than others. This reading would suggest that hypergoods do not actually have a distinct ontological status, and Laitinen seems to lean toward such a reading when he says that "there seems to be a continuum from hypergoods to "ordinary" strong goods and to small values." (199) The idea of a continuum of goods makes no distinction in kind between types of goods. This is an interesting possibility, and I will return to it later. However, Laitinen himself acknowledges that it is not without its problems. In particular, he comments that the "incommensurability of goods . . . makes the idea of a continuum a slightly misleading one. Taylor stresses the conflicts between incommensurable goods and the conflictuality related to the hypergoods." (199) So one challenge that has to be met if we are to defend something like this view is to show how hypergoods can be inherently conflictual if they are ultimately the same in kind as other goods. For now I want to consider the possibility of locating hypergoods within the prescriptive project.

If we take it that hypergoods have a distinct ontological status over against other goods it follows that they cannot be treated as other 'lower' goods when it comes to assessing their relative importance. Their special, 'transcendent' status suggests they should have a privileged role to play in the task of rank ordering the goods in our life.

Hypergoods cannot be compared to other goods because they serve as a standard against which other goods are measured. This gives a certain character to the "intensional" challenge of showing that the demands of some goods, despite initial appearances, do not really conflict, and presupposes at least a partial answer to the extensional challenge, namely, that the weight of the hypergood is qualitatively higher than the weight of any other good. Whenever there is a conflict, the hypergood ought to trump. At the outset, therefore, of the intensional challenge, we already know that jettisoning commitment to a hypergood, or even assigning it a lower priority than 'lower' goods, is not an option. As we know that the hypergood will be paramount in our ordered list of goods, it becomes a condition for other 'lower' goods that their demands be compatible with those of the hypergood. Before we concern ourselves with how ordinary goods might turn out to be compatible with each other, we first have to show that they are compatible with the hypergood, or they will be rejected.

Whether or not Laitinen endorses such a view, I think this is helpful way of articulating what is at play in ontological interpretations of hypergoods. The idea that hypergoods are somehow exempt from the otherwise usual balancing and ordering of goods comes up explicitly in various places and seems to me integral to the idea that they are able to simply trump other goods.[18] Though Taylor talks this way at times, he is clearly uneasy with the idea. Where we must act there may be more than one good at stake and their competing demands have to be considered. For Taylor, the strategy of "declaring that all other goods except the favored ones have a systematically lower priority, are not part of morality, and are to be considered only when the demands of morality are met . . . will not do." ("Leading a Life 175-6) The problem is that marking

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[18] See, for example Rorty, "Taylor on Truth"; Pélabay 152.

off certain goods as exempt from the usual balancing and ordering of goods undermines Taylor's account of practical reasoning.

As we saw above, granting hypergoods a trump status has implications for what Laitinen has called the intensional challenge of defining the normative order of goods. The project is no longer simply to show in what ways the many goods may be compatible with each other; in order to take the demands of a good seriously we first have to establish its compatibility with the hypergood. The kind of reasoning involved in such an undertaking, however, seems to be what Taylor calls the 'bad model of practical reasoning' and argues against (*Sources* 73).

This model is one that understands reason procedurally. Chains of reasoning are judged according to the process that they follow, eschewing altogether any notion of evaluating them according to a substantive notion of 'getting it right': "Correct thinking is not *defined* by substantial truth, because defining it is the prelude to raising the question whether its results are trustworthy." (Taylor, *Sources* 86) The same procedure, however, can yield very different conclusions based on the substantive starting points from which we begin. And this kind of reasoning has nothing to say about the substantive validity of beginnings and endings. As it turns out, this is an important reason for why the model is attractive to moderns, but for now let us look at what kind of practical reasoning this proceduralist conception generates.

The starting point for an argument on this model is what Taylor calls a 'basic reason', which "allegedly offers a description of an act-form which we're morally committed to." (Taylor, *Sources* 76) An argument for doing A is then an argument to the effect that $A = B$, where B is a basic reason. B confers the status of moral obligation to A

by virtue of their identity, not vice versa. The relationship is asymmetrical. The asymmetry required between goods in order for some to act as basic reasons is that which obtains between hypergoods and ordinary goods. It is analogous to the qualitative difference in importance between means and ends in instrumental reasoning. The former are clearly subservient to the latter. This asymmetry is what confers a special role to hypergoods in the intensional project of defining the normative order of goods. So privileging some goods over others in the absolute way entailed by the designation of hypergood status encourages a proceduralist approach to practical reasoning and blocks Taylor's own. As the priority of the hypergood cannot be impugned, there is no room for a bit of transitional reasoning about which goods should inform our actions, except perhaps after the demands of the hypergood are met.

Taylor's own model of practical reasoning proceeds by way of what he calls 'reasoning in transitions' and requires a symmetrical relationship between the goods at issue. [19] Rather than aiming at showing that some position is absolutely correct, this kind of reasoning is concerned with establishing comparative claims; that *this* position is better than *that* position. The point here is not to validate position *A* by showing that it is identical in the relevant respects to a privileged position *B*. Instead we:

> show one of these comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the *move* from A to B constitutes a gain epistemically. This is something we do when we show, for instance, that we get from A to B by identifying and resolving a contradiction in A or a confusion which A relies on, or by acknowledging the importance of some factor which A screened out, or something of the sort. . . . The nerve of the rational proof consists in showing that this transition is an error-reducing one. (*Sources* 72)

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[19] For a detailed account of this form of reasoning, see Taylor, "Explanation." I will focus here on what I take to be the salient features of this model for the question of hypergoods.

The most helpful way of focusing the discussion for our purposes is to look at what it is to offer a reason under this model of reasoning. Rather than reasons being an affirmation of the identity between some act and a basic reason, reasons here seek to articulate the point or purpose of an act. The idea here is that:

> It is one thing to say that I ought to refrain from manipulating your emotions or threatening you, because that is what respecting your rights as a human being requires. It is quite another to set out just what makes human beings worthy of commanding our respect, and to describe the higher mode of life and feeling which is involved in recognizing this. (*Sources* 77)

In other words, a reason for giving moral approval to an act is something that:

> articulate[s] the moral point of our actions. That is why it is so different from offering an external reason. I can only convince you by my description of the good if I speak for you, either by articulating what underlies your existing moral intuitions or perhaps by my description moving you to the point of making it your own. . . . This isn't a step to a more basic level, because there is no asymmetry. (*Sources* 77)

So one way of characterizing what is at stake in moral reasoning as Taylor understands it is to say that it is a contest between self-understandings. This is not to say that there are no practical syllogisms that bear on what to do. It is to say that when we jump straight to determining the implications of certain basic reasons decided in advance, we miss an important part of practical reasoning: deciding which good or goods should predominate in the particular case. This is determined by way of articulating alternative self-interpretations. Implicit in any response to a situation is some understanding of what kind of person would respond to the situation in that way. It may be that there is more than one way to characterize the act in question, which is to say that there may be different reasons, in the Taylorian sense, recommending a given response. The important point here is that arguing in favour of a response will mean articulating one or more of those

reasons, which means articulating a vision of who one is and what one thinks it is good to be. The extent to which one of those articulations offers a better-fitting self-understanding than competing claims is the extent to which one should favour the response recommended by that self-understanding. So what is first at issue in practical reasoning is interpretations of one's own self (or the selves of others). What it is right (or permissible) to do should then follow from this.

If the issue in practical reasoning is self-understanding, however, then one has to be willing to accept that the outcome of reasoning practically may be that one's present self-understanding is altered or in some cases altogether over turned. We might look to scientific theories for an analogy here. Let us say that the move from a geocentric to a heliocentric theory of the universe is error-reducing by helping us make better sense of certain phenomena. In order to appreciate the arguments and make the transition from geocentrism to heliocentrism, one cannot approach the issue with the presupposition that any good theory of the universe must put Earth at its centre. This would force us back into a version of the 'bad model' of practical reasoning. The first step in assessing the value of a theory of the universe would now be to see to what extent it is compatible with the principle of geocentricism. But of course heliocentric theories will fail to meet this condition. Reasoning in transition is not possible here.

The same happens when we accord hypergood status, in the ontological sense, to a particular good. If I proclaim in advance that the demands of justice above all else give shape and meaning to my life and refuse to entertain any alternate self-interpretation not cast in these terms, then transition arguments will not be able to get hold. Just because a person refuses to recognize the strength of an alternative, if unwelcome, self-

interpretation does not mean it is not sound. Sometimes, for instance, friends or family may have a more perspicuous grasp than me of my aims and motivations. So, if Taylor held that hypergoods were an ontological feature of the moral agent – in the sense that every moral agent has one (they are not contingent) and that they are in a privileged, asymmetrical relation to other goods – then he would defeat his own model of practical reasoning. In some cases – indeed, likely the most important ones – Taylor's mode of practical reasoning will not be able to get purchase.[20] The most important decision, that of which good should predominate in our deliberations, will have already been made in advance. The relation between goods must be, at least in principle, symmetrical. If everyone has a hypergood, then, it must apparently be in the weaker sense suggested by Laitinen in his idea of a continuum of goods, where the hypergood is the one that just happens to occupy the top spot in the hierarchy at the moment.

This non-ontological reading, as mentioned above, runs into its own trouble. There are, I think, two problems. The first is essentially a problem of regress. If we hold that there is no difference in principle between hypergoods and other goods, but that hypergoods are just those that as a matter of fact happen to be more valued by a person, or which have an especially important role in the constitution of their identity,[21] then it makes sense to talk about competing hypergoods, as is sometimes done in the literature. Razuka-Szuszcsewski, for instance, tells us that "A person is a subject because, as Taylor points out himself, s/he chooses between different hyper goods." (59) Perhaps there is

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[20] I think Blattberg sees this and therefore tries to preserve an ontological status for hypergoods by arguing that hypergoods must be seen as artworks, rather than falling under the domain of the ethical. As such, for Blattberg, they are not the kinds of things we can reason about at all. Whatever the independent merits of this case, however, it is clear that this will not do as an interpretation of what Taylor means by 'hypergood', as he clearly does not make the kind of distinction between art and ethics made by Blattberg. See Blattberg.

[21] For some examples of the connection between hypergoods and identity, see Gagnon, Morello and Ricoeur.

more than one good at the top of the hierarchy. Though each of these is valued more than the goods below their level, those within the top tier are all valued more or less equally. Call these the hypergoods. But then say some differences of weight develops between the hypergoods. They are each still valued more than the goods below their tier, but a new tier emerges out of their own. Now there are three tiers: ordinary (life and constitutive) goods, hypergoods and what we might call hyper-hypergoods. We may repeat this process, or we may not. The regress does not have to be infinite to pose a problem for us because our question is what work the term 'hypergood' does, the reason it was coined. If the question of which good is the highest for a certain person can only be answered by naming a good that can in principle be displaced by another good by the right kind of practical reasoning, and if it is possible that the question might not have an answer, because there is more than one such good, then we are left wondering why we need a term over and above the language of 'life goods' and 'constitutive goods'.

Second, this reading fails to make sense of why Taylor takes hypergoods to be problematic. That he does so take them is clear, as at one point in *Sources* he explicitly turns his attention to "'hypergoods' and the difficulties they pose for the thesis I've been developing" (*Sources* 64).[22] As long as hypergood status is understood to be the accorded on a *de facto* basis to that good which as a matter of fact is most valued by a person or society, but without that entailing any in principle difference between that good and

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[22] Taylor is not exactly clear here. For which thesis do hypergoods present a problem? In the preceding section, Taylor opposes his version of moral realism to a hybrid of naturalist and nonrealist opponents. He thinks that "the place of these hypergoods in our lives cannot but provoke an epistemological malaise, which in turn feeds the naturalist temper and the various reductive theories that I have been contending against." (*Sources*, 66-7) This develops into a discussion of the possibility for proving the validity of a hypergood cross-culturally, which in turn leads to a discussion of transition arguments. I take this to mean that Taylor is concerned that something in the nature of hypergoods gives a sense of urgency to questions about the nature of moral reasoning. Only once these questions are answered can we hope to evaluate the claims to universal validity made by hypergoods. Taylor's conception of practical reasoning, however, undermines the asymmetry between hyper- and other goods.

others, there seems to be no threat to Taylor's claims about our moral life. While we might at one time or another stress one good more than others, this good is nevertheless capable of being dislodged from its privileged position through an adequate bit of Taylorian practical reasoning. That some goods will have a special role to play in the constitution of a particular person's identity is no problem for Taylor's position. Indeed this kind of commitment is necessary to make sense of the notion of identity at all. An inability to make such commitments would amount to a failure to situate oneself in moral space in the way that Taylor says we must be if we to are to understood as a normal functioning human being and not "stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood." (*Sources* 27) The important point is that, on this reading, conflicts between goods, whether the goods are life, constitutive or hyper goods, will be mediated by a contest of self-interpretations. Where a hypergood is successfully challenged by an incompatible self-interpretation, it will be superseded. None of this is in tension with Taylor's picture of moral agency, but it is clear that Taylor intended to point out a phenomenon that is in tension with that picture. So there must be something further to conferring hypergood status than merely pointing out that good which happens to be most valued by a person or society at a given time.

Let us resume. We have seen that the notion of hypergoods as enjoying some kind of ontological status, marking an in principle difference between hypergoods and other goods, undermines Taylor's account of practical reasoning. This speaks against an ontological reading of the concept and imposes what we might call a *reasoning constraint* on any successful interpretation of the term. Meeting this constraint means

offering an account of hypergoods that does not insulate them from the effects of Taylorian practical reasoning.

It will not do, however, to say that the designation of hypergood status simply marks out a good that is as a matter of fact taken to be of more value. For once we put goods on a continuum in this way, we can divide them into tiers and if we are committed to naming tiers, then we may find we need hyper-hypergoods and hyper-hyper-hypergoods, and so on. And while this may not be fatal to Taylor's overall project, it fails to justify why he should be talking about hypergoods in the first place and not be content with the arguably already crowded taxonomy of life goods, constitutive goods and moral sources. So any successful interpretation of the concept will have to show what phenomenon it picks out and give a reason that endorses coining a term for the phenomenon that does not also endorse coining an indeterminate number of new terms for similar instances of the same phenomenon. Let us call this the *regress constraint*.

Last, we have seen that Taylor clearly takes the phenomenon of hypergoods to be in tension with the general picture he is advancing of our moral lives. A successful interpretation of the term has to preserve some such tension. In other words, there is a *problem constraint* on our interpretation of hypergoods demanding that it not make them too easily assimilable to the Taylorian program.

Chapter 3: The Diagnostic Interpretation

We have already seen that, given what Taylor has to say about them, according hypergoods a distinct ontological status commits us to the view that we all have one or more goods, the nature of which blocks Taylorian practical reasoning in the important cases where a hypergood is at issue. On its own I think this is enough to show that an ontological interpretation of the concept misses the mark. However, in addition to this, there is another reason why we should reject such an interpretation: Taylor does not employ a transcendental argumentative strategy when introducing hypergoods. In fact, he hardly argues for them at all. To the extent that he provides reasons for thinking there may be such a thing as hypergoods, the reasons are of the genealogical type. The particular development of modernity in the West led to a situation where something like what Taylor is calling a hypergood is at work; a connection I will return to in a moment. Moreover, unlike the central concepts of his moral ontology — to name only a few: life and constitutive goods, moral sources, and strong evaluation — hypergoods are not in any of Taylor's work before *Sources* and do not reappear in his subsequent work. This too, I think, speaks against the idea that Taylor sees hypergoods as a component of our moral ontology and helps explain why some commentators have not felt the need to mention the concept when discussing Taylor's moral philosophy. So when Taylor says things such as *perhaps* we cannot do without hypergoods, or that it *seems* we may all have one, we really should stress these qualifiers.

These considerations, coupled with the reasoning constraint, speak decisively against an ontological interpretation of hypergoods. It is important to understand how exactly the reasoning constraint defeats such an interpretation. If hypergoods are an

indispensable feature of our moral ontology and have an inherently privileged status with respect to other goods, this makes it inevitable that cases will arise – those implicating a hypergood – wherein the nature of hypergoods will preclude Taylorian practical reasoning. In other words, at some point the demands of the hypergood will conflict with those of some other good. In this case, Taylor's model of practical reasoning is blocked because what it means to have a hypergood just is to decide in advance that, no matter what, the demands of other goods should not take precedence over those of the hypergood. The step where the good treated as a hypergood could itself be subject to challenge, and its demands rated less important than that of a competing good, is either simply ignored, or escapes notice altogether.

However, it is also clear that, although it may not be inevitable that the role of self-interpretations and transition arguments be ignored in our moral deliberation, Taylor takes it that at least for some, and probably many, this is the case. A non-ontological reading of hypergoods has the advantage of being consistent with the fact that some people fail to realize the dimension of our moral lives picked out by Taylorian practical reasoning without making this blind-sightedness mandatory; that is, without violating the reasoning constraint. Moreover, the segregating effect of hypergoods on our range of goods encourages this blind-sightedness and therefore puts hypergoods in tension with a major goal of Taylor's philosophy: to draw attention to the role and importance of self-interpretations in our moral life. This tension is sufficient to satisfy the problem constraint.

In order to meet the regress constraint while still being able to show how hypergoods pose a problem for Taylor's system, hypergood status cannot be understood

as a merely *de facto* status accorded to the good that, as it happens, tends to win out in competitions between goods. As I remarked earlier, the Taylorian system has no trouble with there being such a good. In fact, the conditions of possibility for having an identity laid out by Taylor seem to require that there be some such good or set of goods. If, however, we understand the designation of hypergood status as representing an attitude or stance that we take toward a particular good or set of goods, then we can maintain the tension between hypergoods and Taylorian practical reasoning without violating the reasoning or regress constraints. The regress is stopped because the point of conferring hypergood status on a good is not to describe its *de facto* place relative to other goods in a person's life – raising the question why we should not have a distinct term for every identifiable level of importance – but to point out the stance a person takes to the good in question. For that person, the priority of this good is apparently non-negotiable. The hypergood has an incomparably greater weight than any others in that person's life, such that all other goods will have a place in that life only to the extent that they are compatible with the demands of the hypergood.

Now we can say that the term 'hypergood' picks out a good which a person has decided, in advance and in spite of any kind of Taylorian practical reasoning, will trump other goods whenever there is a conflict. Choosing to designate a good as a hypergood commits one to by-passing Taylorian practical reasoning whenever the hypergood is involved. Hypergoods are moreover not only not a part of our basic moral ontology, but a are a peculiar development of Western modernity. I think the time has come to say more about this connection.

Once one begins to look at the relationship between hypergoods and modernity in Taylor's work, the tension between hypergoods and Taylor's model of practical reasoning becomes even harder to deny. To start, it is clear that Taylor takes one of the important forces behind the rise to prominence of proceduralist reason to be the modern notion of disengaged freedom. One of the original motivations for endorsing the mechanistic picture of nature central to modern science was theological. The idea of a fixed and ordered cosmos challenged the omnipotence of God. Against the idea that God could in any way be constrained by his own creation, some, like William of Occam, argued for voluntaristic understandings of God's power and "[h]ere at last is an utterly neutral view of the universe, waiting to have purposes given to it by sovereign fiat. The fact/value split is first a theological thesis, and God is at first the sole beneficiary"(Taylor, "Justice" 18). Later, however, some of this power is transferred to humanity. We can project our purposes onto the world, and through the power of a disengaged, instrumental reason we can objectify and control the world in order to advance those purposes, whether survival, the pursuit of happiness or some such. This means that humans are free to set and pursue their own purposes, rather than have them dictated to them by the world, and "what confers dignity on their pursuit is that this is not to be carried on in a blind, licentious or undisciplined fashion, but under the control of far-sighted calculating reason" (Taylor, "Justice" 18). The "modern idea of freedom is the strongest motive for the massive shift from substantive to procedural justifications in the modern world" (Taylor, *Sources* 86) because this proceduralist conception of practical reason endorses particular conclusions based on certain starting premises. Its helplessness

in mediating between those premises is exactly what preserves our modern sense of disengaged freedom; the freedom to choose our own ends.

Just how modern a phenomenon hypergoods are comes out in examining further the connection between hypergoods and procedural practical reasoning. Taylor tells us that "it would appear we all recognize some such [higher-order good]; that this status is just what defines the 'moral' in our culture . . . There has been a common tendency in modern philosophy to define morality by a kind of segregation" (*Sources* 63). In other words, what is distinctive of modern moral philosophy is the presence of hypergoods. The stipulated asymmetry between goods that follows from conferring some the status of hypergood allows for the systematization of the moral through strict priority rules and this accounts for the "tendency to breathtaking systematization in modern moral philosophy" (Taylor, *Sources* 76). The hypergood perspective is absolutely necessary to modern proceduralism: "this segregating boundary can't just be dropped. It is the only way a procedural ethic has of marking some considerations as incomparably higher" (Taylor, *Sources* 88). It seems clear that Taylor takes there to be a strong connection between proceduralism in ethics and the hypergood perspective. He says that: "The more we are really (if inarticulately) moved by a hypergood, the more fiercely we have to defend this boundary [between justice and the good life[23]], however inadequate our explanation of it may be" (Taylor, *Sources* 88). Exactly this kind of sharp boundary is what provides the resources, the basic reasons, which allow us to jump ahead in our practical deliberations to the question of what we should do, without pausing to consider

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[23] Although I think in Taylor's case this is tantamount to saying that a sharp distinction must be maintained between some goods as 'higher' and others 'lower'. This is because Taylor denies any sharp distinction between the right and the good, holding instead that the former is derived from a substantive notion of the latter. In that case, to privilege the right over the good amounts to privileging the demands of one good over those of others.

how the situation bears on what we think it is good to be. In other words, the more 'hyper' the good, the more intense the segregation of goods that encourages the proceduralist approach to moral reasoning.

Taylor describes in the following passage the way in which he takes modern meta-ethical positions, like those concerning the nature of reasoning, and substantive modern moral commitments, like the commitment to disengaged freedom, to interact and reinforce each other:

> The distortive effect comes in that we tend to start formulating our meta-theory of a given domain with an already formed model of valid reasoning, all the more dogmatically held because we are oblivious to the alternatives. This model then makes us quite incapable of seeing how reason does and can really function in the domain, to the degree that it does not fit the model. We cut and chop the reality of, in this case, ethical thought to fit the Procrustean bed of our model of validation. Then, since meta-theory and theory cannot be isolated from one another, the distortive conception begins to shape our ethical thought itself. (Taylor, "Diversity" 231)

This viciously reinforcing circle describes how a commitment to procedural reasoning recommends a hypergood perspective, which in turn reinforces our commitment to procedural reasoning. Importantly, Taylor takes this relationship between meta-ethic and ethics, between proceduralist reasoning and hypergoods, as characteristic of modernity. It is also interesting to note that Taylor's definitive examples of hypergoods are modern. For instance, he holds that ethical theories that stress obligatory action "[i]t seems . . . are motivated by the strongest moral ideals, such as freedom, altruism, and universalism. These are among the central moral aspirations of modern culture, the hypergoods which are distinctive to it" (*Sources* 88). At one point in *Sources* he seems to suggest that Aristotle may have had a hypergood, but for reasons I will explain a little later, I do not think this is quite right.

The reason I have been at pains to stress the connection between modernity and hypergoods is that I think it helps give us a sense of the point to coining the term. This point is related to the differences that Taylor identifies between his own and Alasdair MacIntyre's respective critiques of modernity. Both Taylor and MacIntyre take modern moral theory to be inadequate, and each of them traces the motivation for these inadequacies back to modern epistemological and moral commitments. It is what follows from this kind of criticism that is at issue between the two thinkers. Taylor frames the issue with two questions, which he calls the 'rescue' and 'diagnostic' questions, respectively. The first is whether "the substantive ethical vision which spawned the false meta-ethic [is] to be just abandoned, or can/ought it be rescued in some form?" (Taylor, "Justice" 23) The second is whether

> to the extent that it must be abandoned, is this package of inadequate views to be taken seriously in our diagnosis of modernity as what underlies a coherent but bad, dangerous and destructive practice or way of life? Or should it be discounted in part at least as confusion, rendering us blind to our actual ways of thinking and reacting, and hence no doubt potentially dangerous and destructive, but not precisely in the ways which the false theory indicates on its face? (Taylor, "Justice" 23)

I will look at the rescue question later, when I consider whether or not Aristotle can be said to have had a hypergood. For now let us consider the diagnostic question.

Let us begin by rephrasing the question in light of our interest in the role hypergoods play in Taylor's philosophy. What is being asked is whether the constellation of epistemological and moral commitments distinctive of modernity which lead us to drawing a sharp boundary around the moral – that is, to adopting a hypergood perspective of one kind or another – actually presents a livable option. Another way of putting this would be to say that the segregation between the moral aspect of our lives and the rest of

it demanded by a hypergood perspective makes a corresponding demand for rigorous systematization in our moral lives. Priority rules decide which goods take precedence over others in advance of real situations and are to be observed in any situation, at least to the extent that we want to act morally. The question is whether the people who do adopt a hypergood perspective actually live according to this kind of systematization, or whether their behaviour in the end corresponds to a meta-ethic other than that which recommends the hypergood perspective.

MacIntyre endorses the first response to the diagnostic question. In Taylor's terminology, he takes it that the hypergood perspective is "a coherent but bad, dangerous and destructive practice or way of life."[24] Taylor, however, identifies with the second answer to the question, taking it instead that those who subscribe to a hypergood perspective misunderstand the nature of their moral lives. The problem with the hypergood perspective is that it fails to realize that we cannot presume to know in advance how the relative weight goods have for us in the abstract will translate into the importance they have for how we should act in concrete situations. In suggesting that absolute priority cannot be given, for example, to justice, in our lives, Taylor is quick to point out that he is:

> not taking a stand on the substantive issue. . . . One can have the strongest views about the paramountcy of justice, but still a systematic priority will be difficult to justify. By systematic priority, I mean one that says, Answer all the demands that belong to domain A (say justice, or benevolence) before you move to satisfy any demand of domain B (say, personal fulfillment). ("Leading a Life" 176)

Instead we have to realize that:

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[24] This, of course, is Taylor's formulation from the quote above, but MacIntyre agrees that this is his assessment of modernity. See MacIntyre, "Partial Response".

> Within any domain, there will be issues of vastly different importance. The domain as a whole may be of great importance, in the sense that you may judge that it is here that the value of your life is really decided. But within that domain, there will be matters that are central, and others that are more peripheral, questions where what makes this domain important are centrally at stake and others where something relatively minor is in play. Under the rubric of justice falls such weighty issues as the preservation of basic human rights, or the avoidance of brutal exploitation, on one extreme, and on the other, whether you took your fair share of the housework last week. ("Leading a Life" 176)

It may be that a certain action which satisfies the demands of a number of lesser goods will be the best action to take, even if it does in some way violate the demands of justice. On the other hand, it may not. The point is that we cannot decide the point before knowing the situation. As much as we may think we have decided the questions in advance, once we are confronted with a situation, it is always possible to find our previously determined answers inadequate to the situation. Some times this does happen, and it is not always the case that when we do change our answer to meet the situation, we are acting only prudentially, or loyally, or whatever, but not morally. To the extent that we are acting out of a sense of what it is good to be, we are acting morally and "[t]o decide *a priori* what the bounds of the moral are is just to obfuscate the question whether and to what degree this is so, and to make it incapable of being coherently stated" (Taylor, "Diversity" 233). Once we realize that practical reasoning, and through it the moral, is not just about what, speaking abstractly, we ought to do, but is also about becoming the kind of person we think it is good to be in concrete situations, then the idea that the moral option is defined independently of the concerns a person thinks ought to play a determining role in our response to a situation is unmotivated. Clinging here to "systematic priority leads to pragmatic absurdity" (Taylor, "Leading a Life" 176). We can preserve the systematicity of the moral here only at the expense of holding that the

right thing to do is not the moral thing to do. This makes the famous question 'Why be moral?' all the more poignant and difficult to answer.

It is in this sense that I think Taylor takes the hypergood perspective to be unlivable.[25] Moral practice does not and cannot meet the demands of the theory. We should realize however, that "this does not mean that getting the right meta-ethic makes no practical difference" (Taylor, "Justice" 22). While our basic moral practice may continue on in spite of not having an adequate theory to describe it, bad theory can lead to worse practice. Opposition to the hypergood perspective does not mean that one cannot hold that, for example, justice, is an important good:

> Quite the contrary, it is clearly an important good, even indispensable, in certain contexts of the modern liberal state. (...) Where I disagree is in the absolute pretensions of this kind of theory; the claim to have found *the* principle of liberal society; or the principle which ought to trump all others wherever they come into conflict. I find this whole mode of thinking unreal. . . . We don't and couldn't live our lives this way. Neither our individual lives, nor the lives of our societies. There are always a plurality of goods, vying for our allegiance, and one of the most difficult issues is how to combine them, how to adjudicate at the places where they come into conflict, or mutually restrict each other. (Taylor, "Reply" 250)

Taylor does not deny that some people go a long way towards living out the systematic priority of a hypergood, nor even that their accomplishments in some cases are not to be admired:

> The fact that the goal of total abstraction from the context of practice is a chimera should not blind us to the viability of this ideal of striving in this direction, or to the dependence on it of crucial achievements of modern culture, most especially natural science and technology. But this ideal distorts practical reason beyond all recognition. (Taylor, "Justice" 35)

This distorted understanding of practical reason risks a corresponding misunderstanding of our moral lives, one that encourages the hypergood perspective and denies the real

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[25] This is thus distinct from the issues of unlivability raised elsewhere, see Löw-Beer.

importance of other, 'lesser' goods. This is what leads Taylor to think that "[w]e have to search for a way in which our strongest aspirations towards hypergoods do not exact a price of self-mutilation" (*Sources* 106-7). Claiming an absolute priority for one good when we are in fact committed to many means that, to the extent that we categorically privilege the one good, we will fail to realize our idea of the good life. The point of coining the term 'hypergood', then, emerges out of Taylor's response to his own 'diagnostic' question. There is an approach to moral life which, by giving systematic priority to some good or set of goods over the others, misrepresents our true moral predicament. When a person has adopted this approach, we can pick them out, diagnose them, by saying that they have adopted a hypergood. It is in this sense that I think we should understand 'hypergood' as a diagnostic, as opposed to ontological, concept.

One of the ambiguities that I have for the most part avoided until now is the possibility of a person having more than one hypergood. One might object that this possibility threatens a regress, even when we understand hypergoods in terms of a person's stance or attitude toward a set of goods. The problem is how one could accord systematic priority to more than one good. If the goods that have been accorded systematic priority, the hypergoods, conflict, then one will need a procedure for determining which good trumps in those situations, and this entails according one of the hypergoods a kind of hyper-hypergood status. This amounts to demanding an explanation of how the diagnostic interpretation of hypergoods avoids falling afoul of the regress constraint in light of the fact that a person might accord hypergood status to more than one good. The answer is that once hypergoods are understood to be the product of a stance taken by someone toward a certain good, then a plurality of such goods and

confusion about how to order them relative to one another should no longer be seen as an instance of regress. Rather, what we have is evidence of the 'unlivability' of the hypergood perspective. The person in question believes that our moral predicament conforms to the hypergood model, but in the end cannot find a way to realize this model in practice. Thus Taylor can talk about a person or culture having multiple hypergoods without threatening a regress.

A second objection takes its departure from Gary Gutting's objection to hypergoods. Gutting saw the modern condition as providing evidence against hypergoods. In his opinion, "many modern people are acutely aware of the existence of alternative moral perspectives and of the plausibility of psychological and sociological accounts of the contingent origin of these perspectives. Even spontaneous self-reports of their moral viewpoints often show an unwillingness to absolutize moral claims" (151). In fact, however, we have seen that this kind of scepticism is compatible with the hypergood perspective. The inability of the procedural approach to practical reasoning that follows from the hypergood perspective to mediate between the substantive foundations of an ethical theory can lead to scepticism about the absolute validity of moral claims. So the modern scepticism that for Gutting counts as an argument against hypergoods understood ontologically, is compatible with the concept of hypergoods understood diagnostically.

Up to now, I have been focusing on those considerations that bear on what should count as a successful interpretation of the hypergood concept, trying as much as possible to suspend judgment on the substantive merit of Taylor's account of modernity. The objections considered so far can be understood simply as challenges to the adequacy of my interpretation, apart from any substantive critique of the Taylorian program. Now,

however, I want to turn to objections to my interpretation that cannot be understood apart from certain substantive critiques of Taylor's theory. Exactly because the interpretive and substantive issues begin to entangle themselves at this point, I think it is important to recall at the outset that although I will be trying to show how Taylor responds to some substantive criticisms – and although, for my part, I think compellingly so – our central interest here is what Taylor's stand on the substantive issues tells us about hypergoods. Even if one were to conclusively show that Taylor was wrong on the substantive issues, his (mis)understandings nevertheless shape the hypergood concept and to understand it, we have to understand them.

To focus the discussion, I turn to the 'rescue question' mentioned earlier. Remember that the rescue question asks, if we overcome the modern epistemological project and win for ourselves a meta-ethic that better represents our true predicament, does "the substantive ethical vision which spawned the false meta-ethic [is] to be just abandoned, or can/ought it be rescued in some form?" (Taylor, "Justice" 23) What I take to be at stake in this question is whether the central goods of modernity (universal benevolence, disengaged freedom, the affirmation of ordinary life) can be preserved once we abandon the hypergood perspective. The urgency of the question comes from the fact that the false meta-ethic did not owe its plausibility merely to certain epistemological commitments of modernity. It was also buttressed by the substantive moral commitments of modernity. If modern epistemology entails the false meta-ethic, then it will not only be the case that refuting the modern epistemological project, which Taylor takes the likes of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to have done,[26] will disarm an important set of reasons for adopting the false meta-ethic, but to the extent that the meta-ethic fails to account for the

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[26] See Taylor, "Overcoming" and Taylor, "Theories."

nature of our moral lives, this failure speaks against endorsing the epistemological project. I think Taylor does take this kind of relation to obtain between modern epistemology and meta-ethics. At the heart of the rescue question is whether this is also the relationship that obtains between the substantive moral commitments of modernity and modern meta-ethics, and so whether adopting Taylor's Aristotelian-inspired meta-ethic means abandoning our commitment to one or all of the goods definitive of modernity: disengaged freedom, the affirmation of ordinary life, and universal benevolence.

A common line of criticism seems to hold that this kind of relationship does obtain between the substantive moral commitments of modernity and modern meta-ethics. The modern commitment to what Taylor calls disengaged freedom is expressed in what we might call a 'revisability thesis'. This thesis holds that that which confers dignity upon and is definitive of being human is our capacity to revise our ends. To force me into monogamy, or to pray to one God, or to work in profession I revile, is to denigrate me by taking away that which is most important to me as a human being; my capacity to choose between competing conceptions of the good life. Recognizing each person's dignity means ensuring that they each enjoy an equal right to exercise this capacity for revision and so this has become a central demand of contemporary moral and political theory. For some this entails a redistribution of resources, for others not. What is important here is that for some critics committed to this view, Taylor's meta-ethical reflections on the embeddedness of goods in the social practices of a community either speak merely to the material conditions required to realize our revisability potential, and so belong to an empirical psychology and are consistent with the meta-ethic criticized by Taylor, or are

inconsistent with the revisability thesis. They are inconsistent with the revisability thesis and empirically wrong if they are taken to mean that humans cannot revise their ends. Some people obviously do change their conception of the good life from time to time. They are inconsistent with the revisability thesis and normatively wrong if they are taken to mean that, although we could, we should not change our conception of the good life to one that is incompatible with the existing practices of the community. To continue participating in practices of our community we find abhorrent or unjust clearly defies something we take to be central to morality. [27]

The upshot for us is that Taylor has to be able to show that revisability is possible under his meta-ethical alternative. Otherwise, we will continue to have moral reasons for rejecting his project and endorsing the false meta-ethic, even if we have no epistemological reasons for doing so. In other words, if conferring certain goods hypergood status is the only way to give them a revisionary force, then we will continue to have moral reasons to endorse a hypergood perspective to the extent that we think the existing practices of our community fail to adequately meet the demands of important goods. In fact, Taylor takes this question to be "one of the crucial questions of modern moral thought: to what extent the "revisionist" claims made on behalf of hypergoods ought to be accepted at all" (*Sources* 98). Part of the problem with modernity for Taylor is that we are prevented from asking this question when:

> [theories] inspired (inarticulately) by a hypergood . . . cannot but distort our deliberative predicament and draws a rigid boundary between the 'moral' and the 'non-moral' or (in Habermas's case) between 'ethical' considerations and those relating to the 'good life', which badly occludes their relation[.] (*Sources* 98)

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[27] For a clear statement of this criticism. see Kymlicka, *Liberalism*, especially chapter five.

However, in order to assess at all to what extent the revisionist claims of hypergoods should be accepted, revisability must be a possibility.

It is clear that Taylor believes his moral ontology keeps this possibility open and that the "error of modern rationalism is to believe that such thinking [that goods are embedded in community practices] must inevitably be a prisoner of the status quo, that our moral understanding can only be revisionist at the cost of being disengaged" (Taylor, "Justice" 35-6). What is being objected to here is the notion that in order for our goods to have the revisionary force we think, at least some times, they ought to have, we have to segregate them from other lower goods that are deemed not to have this force and give them strict priority over those others; in short, that the hypergood perspective is the only way to secure revisability. The hypergood perspective and proceduralist ethics criticized by Taylor in "Justice" are of a piece insofar as they both aspire to maximally abstract from the particular context of a decision about what to do, "to frame formulae which minimally rely on context" (Taylor, "Justice" 36). Designating some goods as hypergoods is an attempt to execute this abstraction by committing, no matter what the situation, to satisfy the demands of the hypergood before those of any others. Only by some such measure can formulae or rules about what to do be determined in advance of a situation.

In contrast to this, we have seen that Taylor's model of practical reason is context-dependent, and unabashedly so. For Taylor we cannot say how it is appropriate to act until we know what goods are at stake in a situation and in what measure. He thinks that:

> insofar as we have some sense of our lives, of what we are trying to lead, we will be relating the different goods we seek not just in regard to their

> differential importance, but also in the way they fit, or fail to fit, together in the unfolding of our lives. These goods may play different roles and have different places (and this may mean different times) in our lives. And grasping this may help us decide what we ought to do. (Taylor, "Leading a Life" 180)

So in fact, the embeddedness of goods in a community is not at play for Taylor in the way characterized by critics like Kymlicka. Taylor's model of practical reasoning is a context-dependent one, and the community in which we live and act is an important feature of the context relevant to our practical deliberations. This does not mean that the existing practices of the community ought to have a trump status in our deliberations. First, the context-dependency of practical reasoning draws on our practices construed in a broad sense, as including "paradigm models, in life or story, or however" (Taylor, "Justice" 35). In other words, stories, dreams, imagined utopias or the logical entailments of a moral commitment not yet realized can serve in a piece of Taylorian practical reasoning. We are not restricted to what the community actually does in its waking life. Second, by according trump status to the demands of the community we would not be escaping the context-minimal hypergood perspective, we would simply be swapping one hypergood for another. This is why Taylor is "unhappy with the term 'communitarianism'. It sounds as though the critics of this liberalism wanted to substitute some other all-embracing principle, which would in some equal and opposite way exalt the life of the community over everything" ("Reply" 250). Even though they do not have trump status, no other good on Taylor's model does either, so the demands of the community may *in some cases* trump the demands of a good like justice when the two conflict. But this still allows for revisionism because:

> the goods about which one reasons in its context-related way include transcendent ones, and that this reasoning does not by any means have to

> be comprehensive only, but can be highly revisionist. True, in this latter case the context will largely be provided not by established practices, but by models or stories embodying a higher perfection (like those of the death of Socrates, or the Gospels). But it will be context-related none the less, that is, not trying to frame formulae which minimally rely on context, but rather trying to articulate better what this context implies. (Taylor, "Justice" 36)

Taylor is simply not in the business of trying to determine *a priori* in what kinds of situations the demands of some 'lesser' goods should outweigh those of one as important as, say, justice, although his thoughts on the place of Quebec in Canadian confederation provide an example of a concrete situation where he advocates for something like this.[28]

Taylor therefore rejects the idea that the hypergood perspective is necessary to hold on to the revisability thesis, although the considerations that play in deciding whether or not to revise this or that end are more robust on his account. He thinks that: "[T]o be made coherent they [procedural ethics] require restatement in substantive form" ("Justice" 27) but that they can be so stated. What is needed is to exit the hypergood perspective altogether by revoking the special status of hypergoods. This amounts to retaining an allegiance to the goods that were given hypergood status but without giving them systematic priority; an option that, taking justice as our example, is nevertheless compatible with "the strongest views about the paramountcy of justice" (Taylor, "Leading a Life" 176).

Another way of stating the criticism often leveled at Taylor is to say that, although this contextualist, balancing approach sounds nice, it will not work. Those who support the idea of "a version of liberalism that can reconcile conflicting demands . . . a morality that reflects universal values of individual equality and freedom and the juridical

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[28] See Taylor *Reconciling*; Taylor, "Multiculturalism"; and Taylor, "Reply," especially pages 249-53.

capacity to uphold those values, but at the same time, . . . [not] override collective needs" (Sibley 205) will suffer the problem of all those who sit on the fence for too long. Taylor is "unable to offer a solid *theoretical* defence of the principles of liberalism on which he bases his politics of recognition. . . . when push comes to shove, Taylor is unable to defend liberalism . . . [because his] *theoretical* claims fall short" (Sibley 249, emphasis added). Eventually, the line goes, giving an inch leads to losing a mile. The lack of systematic priority for justice leads down the slippery slope to totalitarianism. I think we have already seen how Taylor answers such charges. The reason I raise the criticism in this form is to stress Sibley's demand for *a priori* theoretical prescriptions for how questions of what to do ought to be resolved. It is interesting, because in this case theory is identified with the systematic priority of the hypergood perspective. In rejecting the hypergood perspective, Taylor is at the same time highlighting the limits of abstract normative theory. I think this is important because Taylor clearly takes himself to be rejecting something of the kind in his later work, when he adopts the 'social imaginary' as his master concept. He says of that term:

> There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. (Taylor, *Imaginaries* 23)

The complexity and possibility for tensions within a social imaginary mean that arguing from one, drawing on the resources of a social imaginary in practical reasoning, will not

be possible to do with the degree of systematicity required by abstract normative theory without conferring hypergood status on some element of the social imaginary.

The understanding of hypergoods presented here affords an understanding of why the term does not reappear in his later work. Hypergoods are not a feature of our moral ontology and so need not be mentioned. After *Sources*, Taylor's attention shifted away from trying to diagnose the problems with modern theory to presenting a positive alternative; an example of what the human sciences look like under his theory. 'Hypergood' is a diagnostic concept and its task came to play a diminishing role in Taylor's work. I do not care to overemphasize this point. The evident ambiguity in Taylor's use of the concept no doubt has an important role to play in its discontinuation, but I think it is a reasonable conjecture that the changing nature of his work after *Sources* may be a reason for why he did not feel the need to confront that ambiguity.

The final objection I will consider is that Taylor too, for all his criticism of the hypergood perspective, has a hypergood. He says that "[t]he domain of ultimately important goods has a sort of prescriptive unity" ("Diversity" 244) and that even Aristotle, on whom his meta-ethic is modeled, may have had a hypergood: "We could say that what plays the role of 'hypergood' in Aristotle's theory is the "supreme good" (*teleion agathon*) itself"(*Sources* 66). Moreover it is clear that for Taylor, our moral lives consist in the task of trying to balance the demands of competing goods of the course of a life, giving each their proper – though this need not mean equal – due, and this balancing over the course of a life is itself a good. So Taylor is committed to the predomination of a particular good; one good in his thought is accorded a special status over others and in this sense plays the role of a hypergood. An examination of the nature of this good,

however, shows that it does not really behave like a hypergood as I interpret the concept. While some may take this is as an argument that Taylor's hypergood concept has a broader range of application than I have been arguing here, I think rather that when this good is adopted as the highest good, it defeats the need for a term like 'hypergood'. Let me explain.

Taylor holds that there is an inherent tension in moral life; that: "Real ethical life is inescapably led between the one and the many" ("Leading a Life" 183). This is a tension he sees himself as having inherited from Aristotle and notes that "some people have objected that Aristotle seems to fall into a confusion – or perhaps pulls a fast one on us – in the discussion of the supreme good in *Ethics* I.vii. He talks first as though there might be one, but there might also be several such ends. Later he seems to slip into assuming that there is just one final aim" (Taylor, "Leading a Life" 183). My suggestion is that we ought to see this apparent confusion in Aristotle as akin to the question of whether or not Taylor espouses a hypergood. In fact, it parallels the slide Abbey sees in *Sources* from the contingency of hypergoods to their apparent necessity. We can then take Taylor's response to the charges of confusion in Aristotle as a model for how he might respond to critics charging him of himself operating within a hypergood perspective. He thinks of this shift in Aristotle that:

> some move of this kind has to be made. There are in fact two separable stages of reflection, which Aristotle perhaps does not separate here: We can determine what we think the goods are that we seek "for their own sakes" and also their relative ranking, if any. But even if we see a plurality of final ends of equal rank, we still have to *live* them; that is, we have to design a life in which they can be somehow integrated, in some proportions, since any life is finite and cannot admit of unlimited pursuit of any good. This sense of a life – or design or plan, if we want to emphasize our powers of leading here – is necessarily one. If this is our final end, there can only be one. ("Leading a Life" 183)

The sense of unity expressed here is different than that demanded by a hypergood. A priority rule like 'meet the demands of giving each good its proper place in the course of a whole life' seems strange as a rule.

The prescriptions of such a rule vary from situation to situation and it is perfectly compatible with Taylor's model of practical reasoning and his general philosophy. If this were the highest good for everyone, there would be no need to talk of hypergoods, because there would be no goods with hypergood status that act, insofar as they are treated as hypergoods, to distort our moral predicament and lead us into bad modes of practical reasoning. So although we *could* talk about a hypergood in Taylor's case, I do not see much point in doing so. In the case of this particular good *qua* hypergood, the problem constraint fails to be met. At best 'hypergood' becomes a way of saying 'important good' and we can wonder if we are not now running afoul of the regress constraint on the use of the term. At worst, we obfuscate the fact that this comprehending good is in some sense compatible with its priority sometimes being overruled. In some cases it may be that it is appropriate to heavily privilege the demands of one good, sacrificing the important demands of many others, including balancing. The need for balance may be met by adopting a decidedly unbalanced approach. One is reminded of the caveat to the old motto 'Everything in moderation': 'including moderation itself'. There is a corresponding caveat in the case of the comprehending good. Calling it a hypergood may cause us to overlook that caveat and see vicious paradox or confusion in the place of a call for *phronesis*.

Conclusion:

I have argued along with Ruth Abbey that hypergoods should be seen as a contingent feature of our moral lives. In addition to her phenomenological observation that some people appear to simply not live in accordance with anything like a hypergood and her contention that, were everyone to have a hypergood, "the challenges of pluralism would not be as piquant as Taylor frequently suggests they are" (Abbey, *Philosophy Now* 37), we now have a number of other reasons to reject an ontological reading of the hypergood concept. Taylor does not deploy for hypergoods the transcendental strategy used to establish the other features of his moral ontology. If hypergoods were a universal, ineliminable feature of human agency, then the deployment of Taylorian practical reasoning will be blocked in those important cases which involve hypergoods. The sharp segregation of the moral from the demands of other goods, the drive to systematicity and the silence with respect to moral sources that Taylor takes to be at once unhealthy, confused and characteristic of contemporary moral and political theory, would be a simple function of our moral ontology.

Moreover, I have argued that it will not do to understand hypergood status simply as being accorded on a *de facto* basis to that good which happens to be most valued, or especially integral to a person's identity. On that view, it would either be unclear why Taylor should think hypergoods problematic, or why he should have bothered to coin the term, or both. The answer I have proposed is to see hypergood status as defined by a stance taken toward a particular good or set of goods. To take this stance toward a good is to accord it a special status in our lives that goes beyond treating its demands with great importance. It is to decide that, come what may, we ought to act in such a way as to meet

the demands of this good before meeting the demands of any other. Once we adopt the hypergood perspective, Taylorian practical reasoning can get no purchase. For Taylor, this means we skip over the most important aspect of our moral lives and are encouraged to adopt a proceduralist mode of practical reasoning which in its turn begins to shape our meta-ethical perspective. The adoption of a hypergood occludes the real task of moral life, which is to give each good its proper place in the course of a whole life. In trying to meet the demands of a hypergood in particular cases, we may have to forgo other goods to the extent that we are unable to realize our conception of the good life overall.

This reading places the hypergood concept within the trajectory of Taylor's lifeworks. From early on, Taylor had been arguing against reductionist and proceduralist approaches to moral and political philosophy. In *Sources*, where Taylor provides the most comprehensive exposition of his moral philosophy, 'hypergood' provides a name for such theories that ties them into his chosen vocabulary without assimilating them into the ontological resources he uses to construct his alternative meta-ethic. Once, in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, he shifts his focus away from the critical and toward the positive moment of his project, this language is no longer necessary. The ambiguous term is dropped rather than refined.

To conclude, I would like to offer a remark on what I think the wider importance of this reading of hypergoods may be. Taylor notes that in modern culture the appeal to *phronesis* is often seen as a surrender to unreason ("Justice" 29). It is to abandon what resources we have that might help guide us in making a decision and simply go with our 'gut' instincts. Once we go down this path, we are on the slippery slope to forsaking the demands of important goods like justice and freedom. This danger is particularly acute in

the context of modern, pluralist societies, where disagreement on which goods may trump justice or freedom is widespread and severe. If Taylor is right, however, our individual moral lives are a microcosm of the conflicts played out between competing goods in pluralist societies. Learning to manage the competing demands of goods in our individual lives can help prepare us for managing the demands of competing goods in the life of society. To the extent that the hypergood perspective masks this facet of our moral lives, it robs us of our best resource for learning how to build a successful pluralist society.

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