BETWEEN ROMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC EXPRESSIVISM: CHARLES TAYLOR AND JEFFREY STOUT ON THE EXPRESSIVE VALUE OF RELIGION

by

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Abstract

This thesis compares the writings of Charles Taylor and Jeffrey Stout on expressivism and religion. Taylor and Stout both formulate expressivist theories in order to defend the expressive value of religion in secular modernity. Taylor appeals to a Romantic form of expressivism that highlights the importance of poetic language for articulating religious faith, while Stout argues for a pragmatic expressivism which focuses on the role of "expressive rationality" in religious language. Stout follows Robert Brandom in theorizing the rational aspects of language described by pragmatic expressivism, and applies Brandom's philosophical project to an analysis of religious and ethical discourse. Taylor criticizes Brandom's rationalist theory of language for its neglect of the "disclosive" dimension of language. From Taylor's Romantic-inspired perspective, language works to theologically and ontologically "disclose" the world to human beings, which he argues is best seen through the exemplary poetic expression of post-Romantic authors such as Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The conflict between Romantic and pragmatic expressivism visible in the Taylor/Brandom debate is expanded to consider the division between Taylor's and Stout's approaches to the topic of religious expression. The disagreement between their expressivisms is particularly salient in their diverging approaches to metaphysics and theology. Taylor's Romantic expressivism leaves room for both immanent and transcendent interpretations of the world, especially per the "ontological indeterminacy" of post-Romantic poetry. Stout, on the other hand, critiques metaphysics and theology for positing a non-human world of transcendence, arguing that religious expression should adapt itself to the nonmetaphysical perspective of modern secularized discourse. His criticism of Taylor's Catholicism is considered in this respect, and rejected for its attempt to interpret Taylor as supplying a dogmatic

metaphysics, whereas Taylor's Romantic expressivism is concerned with exploring and not asserting what metaphysical or theological realities exist. Romantic expressivism is also considered in a positive light for avoiding the anthropocentrism that pragmatism is committed to.

Finally, Taylor's and Stout's work on religious expression is considered in relation to their shared criticism of John Rawls's "idea of public reason" which seeks to limit the public expression of religious ideas. Stout's pragmatic expressivism gives him the resources to provide a more fulsome response to Rawls than that given by Taylor. Although Taylor is also concerned about Rawls's political theory, he is ultimately more ambivalent about Rawls than Stout is. Following Brandom's notion of "expressive freedom," Stout crafts an appealing alternative conception of public rationality that is able to incorporate the insights of religionists.

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Abbreviations

Works by Charles Taylor

CM	"A Catholic Modernity?" In *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain*, edited by James L. Heft, 13-38. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
CR	"Celan and the Recovery of Language." In *Dilemmas and Connections*. 56-77. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.
LA	*The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.
LM	"Language not Mysterious?" In *Dilemmas and Connections*. 39-55. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.
SA	*A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.
SS	*Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Works by Jeffrey Stout

DT	*Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
EB	*Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

Introduction | Romantic and Pragmatic Expressivism

Charles Taylor is in many respects a philosopher who needs no introduction. His far-ranging work in various philosophical disciplines has won him a global audience, and he continues to produce important research, even into his nineties. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be largely considering Taylor in one of his favorite roles: as a defender of Romantic thought, especially in its poetic and theological resonances. Romanticism has figured heavily throughout Taylor's writings, beginning with his early discussions of the Romantic influences on Hegel (*Hegel*), continuing on in his historical analyses of modernity (*Sources of the Self*, *A Secular Age*), as well as in his recent publications on the philosophy of language ("Language not Mysterious?", "Celan and the Recovery of Language," *The Language Animal*). Additionally, his forthcoming companion piece to *The Language Animal* promises a book-length exposition on Romantic poetics. By attending to these sources in this thesis, I hope to provide an alternative way of understanding religious expression than that seen in the anti-Romantic pragmatism of Jeffrey Stout. Stout is a pragmatist philosopher and scholar of religion who seeks to defend the rationality of religious expression throughout his work, especially in his most important publication to date, *Democracy and Tradition*. Taylor and Stout differ on what the expressive value of religion consists in: Taylor argues that it lies in poetic expressions of religious and theological tradition, while Stout contends that it is rather in its contribution to the furtherance of rational discourse in democratic politics.

Although much of Taylor's work on Romanticism has been descriptive in nature—he locates its importance in the historical development of modern selfhood (*Sources of the Self*), as well as in the current trend of "expressive individualism" (*A Secular Age*)—he has recently

become more prescriptive concerning the role he sees played by Romantic thought in understanding language, religion, and spirituality. Taylor advocates for a Romantic conception of language—what I refer to throughout as his "Romantic expressivism"—that is attentive to the workings of poetic expression in religious, ethical, and metaphysical thought. Historically, as Taylor writes, "Romantic expressivism arises in protest against the Enlightenment ideal of disengaged, instrumental reason" (SS 413). Taylor follows the impetus of the early Romantics, especially Johann Gottfried Herder, who repudiate the Enlightenment's view of language as a neutral medium of communication in which rational description can debunk the illusions of metaphor and symbol.[1] Against Enlightenment theories of language, Taylor advocates for a "constitutive" construal of language inspired by the insights of the Romantics. The Romantic conception of language is constitutive as "it gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language" (LA 4). This is the idea of language Taylor has defended from his early work on Herder, up to his recent publications on Romanticism.

It is important to note that not all interpreters of Taylor consider him as first and foremost a Romantic thinker. Nicholas H. Smith has suggested that "it is misleading to say that Taylor himself is a 'Romantic' expressivist," insofar as "it is not a consequence of his expressivism to privilege feeling over thought."[2] I hope to counter this claim by showing how Taylor consistently cleaves to the Romantic emphasis on feeling, affect, and subjectivity. Taylor is ultimately

[1] Taylor outlines the details of Herder's expressivism in his book on Hegel. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13-29.
[2] Nicholas H. Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," in *Postanalytic and Metacontinental: Crossing Philosophical Divides*, ed. Jack Reynolds, James Chase, James Williams and Edwin Mares (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 152.

committed, in the strong Herderian sense, to "a notion of feeling . . . as inseparable from thought."[3] This is most evident in his interpretations of poetic works that explore the relationship between idiosyncratic poetic expression and traditional religion. The intense subjectivity and *feeling* of the post-Romantic poets are in particular a key source of inspiration for Taylor's reflections on religious faith.

Taylor argues that the best defenses of religious tradition in modernity have been articulated by Romantic and post-Romantic poets. His discussions of post-Romantic authors Gerard Manley Hopkins in *A Secular Age* and Paul Celan in "Celan and the Recovery of Language" are particularly intent on working out the relationship between theology, poetic language, and subjective expression. These selections from his work serve as an implicit denial of rationalist philosophies—such as advanced by G.W.F. Hegel and Robert Brandom—that deny relevance for the poetic dimension of language. Taylor seeks to develop a philosophy of language that decenters rational assertion in order to make room for indirect modes of poetic communication. He argues that the poetic works of Hopkins and Celan model notable examples of linguistic expression that reclaim the spirit of the Romantic generation from the 1790's. Taylor refers to Hopkins and Celan as "post"-Romantics given their distance from the time of the original Romantics, but the ethic of poetic expression they display is very much in keeping with the broad sweep of Romantic thought.

Taylor's work on Romantic expressivism has drawn criticism for its perceived sentimentality, especially in the context of his theistic resistance to the disenchantment of modernity. Colin Jager argues that the danger in Taylor's approach is that "the romantic critique

[3] Taylor, *Hegel*, 21.

of enlightened secularity becomes simply a nostalgic desire for something more, some 'spirit' of poetry that will open our mundane earthly lives toward the transcendent."[4] This general concern about the prevalence of nostalgia in Taylor's theological Romanticism holds for many who have followed the "religious turn" in his work since the publication of *A Catholic Modernity?* (1999).[5] Even for commentators such as Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles who applaud "Taylor's unapologetic acknowledgement of his Christian convictions," they still question his move to characterize religious poetry—specifically that of Gerard Manley Hopkins—as an exemplary expression of transcendent desire. Hauerwas and Coles suggest that Taylor "reifies and overplays" the immanence/transcendence distinction, especially in how he seems to long for religious transcendence while neglecting the immanent forms of ethics and religion.[6]

Stout has also criticized Taylor for his strong emphasis on the role of the transcendent in spiritual life. In his review of Taylor's "A Catholic Modernity?" Marianist lecture, Stout cautions that Taylor's characterization of transcendence as a way of "aiming beyond life" (CM 21) neglects the possibility of immanent paths that lead toward self-transcendence. Stout suggests that figures such as John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson were also concerned with "self-transcending religious possibilities," but in a way that did not require avowal of "transcendent metaphysics."[7] Stout's aversion to Taylor's theology, as well as the specter of metaphysics more generally, is a key feature of the difference between them. While Taylor tries to articulate and

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[4] Colin Jager, "This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor's Romanticism," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 183.

[5] Carlos D. Colorado, "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 77.

[6] Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on a Secular Age," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 350, 357.

[7] Jeffrey Stout, "Review of *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*," *Philosophy in Review/Comptes Rendus Philosophiques* 21 no. 6, (2001): 426.

defend a certain conception of theology that is open to a metaphysical sense of transcendence, Stout is concerned that this represents yet another iteration of religious thought that dogmatically asserts its theological concepts through a domineering metaphysical framework. In *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout argues for an "ethics without metaphysics" that serves an implicit rejection of Taylor's approach.[8]

In his own work on religion, Stout rejects the Romantic approach to religious thought that Taylor takes. For Stout, the expressive value of religion lies in its contribution to the discursive practice of "immanent criticism," the form of rational discourse in which one engages with one's opponent's views in a common space of reasoning (DT 69-70). In the context of disputes around religious ideas, this often means taking the theological or ethical commitments of your interlocutor and exposing the incoherence of their position. As Nicholas Friesner suggests, "immanent criticism requires that the critic be willing to engage with normative commitments that are not her own in order to converse with a person or community. Through this engagement the critic hopes to critique that person or community and transform them in some way."[9] Taylor emphasizes a contrary mode of discursive persuasion within Romantic poetics, one that operates according to the linguistic paradigm of "disclosure." From Taylor's perspective, disclosing a theological or a religious commitment does not mean rationally asserting it, but instead requires expressing the force of the commitment in an indirect way, paradigmatically, through poetic or aesthetic expression.

Against Taylor's Romantic expressivism, Stout advocates for "pragmatic expressivism"; a theoretical orientation that seeks to understand social discursive practices in terms of their basis

[8] The title of chapter eleven of *Democracy and Tradition*.

[9] Nicholas Aaron Friesner, "Social Critique and Transformation in Stout and Butler," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no. 3 (2016): 426.

in rationality. Stout's pragmatic expressivist project is in large part indebted to the pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom. Brandom has sought to provide a systematic account of rationality and language in his work, most notably in his first book *Making it Explicit* (1994), as well as in his recent interpretation of Hegel in *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology (2019). Stout has grafted key aspects of Brandom's philosophy into his work on religion, arguing that Brandom's inferentialist approach to language is "ideally suited for application in religious studies."[10] Stout explains the relevance of Brandom's pragmatist theoretical orientation for the study of religion as follows:

> When we take religious and ethical discourse as our subject matter, what we are examining in the course of our work, it seems to me, is precisely what Brandom's Sellarsian theory directs us to: the inferences being made by the people we are studying, the transitions they make into discourse when they perceive something, and the discursive exits they execute by acting intentionally in the world. These are the sorts of moves we are trying to interpret when we engage in our own variety of normative scorekeeping.[11]

Stout's interest in the study of religion is primarily in regards to the pragmatics of what religionists say and do in the course of following their religious traditions. For Stout, religion, like any other social practice, is essentially a reason-giving and -receiving activity practiced by communities of discoursers, all of whom are keeping normative score on one another. Stout applies Brandom's notion of the "game of giving and asking for reasons" to the social practice of democracy, particularly the various religious and ethical discourses that feature in democratic

[10] Jeffrey Stout, "Radical Interpretation and Pragmatism: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth," in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy Frankenberry (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45.
[11] Stout, "Radical Interpretation and Pragmatism," 45-6.

communities. Stout also follows Brandom in appropriating Hegel's project for the American philosophical context. Jonathan Tran thus speaks of Stout's "Brandomian-inflected Hegelianism," given that the version of Hegel that Stout endorses is adopted from Brandom.[12]

Taylor's Romantic criticisms of Hegel's and Brandom's rationalism can be extended to question Stout's approach to the topic of religious expression. The pragmatic expressivism advocated for by Stout often resembles what Taylor calls a "closed world structure," where reference to the transcendent is elided in favor of an immanentized, or secularized, form of rational discourse (SA 551). This secularization of discourse is approved of by Stout as it focuses public discussion on matters of immanent social concern. Taylor, on the other hand, is resistant to discursive secularization, at least to the extent that it becomes an invisible barrier that prevents expression of religious and spiritual ideas that do not abide by the rules of secular rationality. Taylor's strategy of resistance lies in developing an account of poetic expression that resists the constrictive effects of discursive secularization. In this vein, he gestures toward a coterie of Romantic and post-Romantic authors who have developed poetic languages that play within a space of "ontological indeterminacy." Taylor suggests that secularized discourse carries with it a pre-determined naturalist ontology; or at least, it can have the effect of shutting down references to the transcendent. In his appeal to Romantic "ontological indeterminacy," Taylor wants to carve out a space for poetic and theological languages that defy the border-line of the religious/secular binary and, in so doing, "dissipate the false aura of the obvious" that often accompany closed readings of the immanent frame (SA 551).

[12] Jonathan Tran, "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 542.

Taylor is overly attached to traditional religion by Stout's lights because of how Taylor contests the ontological refusal of pragmatism. Taylor's argument for developing ontologically rich languages as a mode of resistance to the flattening effects of discursive secularization is predicated on his claim that our ontologies ought to be informed by our phenomenologies. He thinks that the accounts we give of the world—whether spiritual or secular—should faithfully correspond to the experiences we have of it, without always needing to be filtered through naturalist ontology. This does not mean uncritically reducing one's experience to the unreflective terms of one's religious tradition. Taylor is not an irrationalist in this respect and does not endorse frankly fideistic perspectives. However, he argues that the "anticipatory confidence" with which we experience our lives as socially dependent beings must also inform our existence as spiritual beings (SA 550). The sources within nature and within communal life upon which we depend for our flourishing can thus legitimately be described in ontologically rich terms that conspire with theological languages.

One challenge of comparing Taylor's and Stout's work lies in the fact that there is relatively little overlap between them in the literature. Stout has only publicly critiqued Taylor in his review of *A Catholic Modernity?*. Taylor, as far as I know, has not published any remarks on Stout's work. Additionally, scholarly commentators have rarely addressed them in tandem. For example, although Jennifer Herdt compares their approaches to virtue ethics in one of her texts, this analysis is limited to a couple of pages.[13] In another monograph by Mark Ryan that contains whole chapters dedicated to studies of Taylor and Stout, these analyses are kept separate.[14] The

[13] Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 6-9.
[14] Mark Ryan, *The Politics of Practical Reason: Why Theological Ethics Must Change Your Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

reality of this scarce overlap in textual interaction between these two thinkers means that it will be necessary to construct a dialogue between them, in order to understand how their different scholarly approaches toward expressivism and religion might speak to one another.

A convenient way to consider how a critical discourse might unfold between them would be to examine a mutual interlocutor whom both Taylor and Stout have responded to, and consider the implications of this interlocutor's work for the hypothetical dispute between Taylor and Stout I am developing. The figure I would like to introduce for this purpose is Robert Brandom, as his work on expressivism in particular provides a suitable place to assess the differences in Taylor's and Stout's own expressivisms. Whereas Stout has brought on board key aspects of Brandom's rationalist and pragmatic expressivism to his own expressivist theory of religion and politics, Taylor has been more critical of Brandom's philosophy. Taylor's expressivism, as Nicholas Smith has shown, stands in direct contrast to Brandom's rationalist expressivism.[15]

With the battle-lines thus drawn—between pragmatists Stout and Brandom on one side, and the Romantic Taylor on the other—it might seem that Taylor and Stout are more opposed than allied on the question of expressivism. While I want to argue that at key points in their arguments, and in the general emphasis of their writings, they develop very different expressivist conceptions of language and rationality, both of their intellectual projects coalesce around the shared idea that "religion" has a distinctive expressive value in secular modernity. While they ultimately have different stories to tell about what I am calling the "expressive value of religion," their defense of variations of this story makes their writings worth reading together. Although I

[15] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor."

focus on their disagreements in this regard in chapters 1 and 2, in chapter 3 I locate a potential liaison between their positions in their joint criticism of Rawls's idea of public reason. While their stances against Rawls do not perfectly align, there is enough evidence to suggest that they similarly resist Rawls's liberal arguments against public religious expression.

Another dimension of the agonism between Taylor and Stout concerns their personal stances toward religion. Taylor's Catholicism, and Stout's advocacy for an Emersonian natural piety,[16] represent two competing religious conceptions of the world. Although as philosophers, as well as scholars of religion, they strive to craft arguments that can appeal to religionists and secularists alike, it is nonetheless the case that Taylor's sympathy toward a certain conception of Christian faith, and Stout's skepticism of it, are often motivated more by affective identification than rational argument. I will track this religious dispute between Taylor and Stout as a supplement to my main argument concerning their philosophical differences. The distinction between their religious perspectives, as I am reading them, is that in Taylor's Romanticism we can see a desire for communion with transcendence, and in Stout's pragmatism the resolution to concede that naturalism has ultimately won, and that the way forward is to keep religion in the conversation without admitting that it can provide answers with any ontological weight.

Overview of Chapters

I begin chapter 1 of this thesis by introducing Brandom's account of expressivism as his work throws into sharp relief the division between pragmatic and Romantic expressivism. For Brandom, expressing something in a language most fundamentally means asserting it. His

[16] "Mine is not a theocentric vision," Stout writes: "I do not postulate divine purposes, let alone divine intentions, in order to explain the data of modern science or to explicate the sense of dependence I feel. But there is room in my vision for wonder, awe, and even gratitude—a kind of piety, in short, for the powers that bear down upon us, for the majestic setting of our planet and its cosmos, and for the often marvelous company we keep here" (EB 181).

philosophy of language is centered on the claim that "no sort of speech act is important for philosophers to understand as assertion."[17] According to his pragmatic expressivism, language is first and foremost a rational activity, and the poetic languages explored by the Romantics are ultimately parasitic on the rational language games that humans play. Stout recommends following Brandom's rationalist treatment of expressivism, as he too is concerned with the potential "relativism" and "irrationalism" of Romantic thought (EB 262). Stout applies Brandom's philosophy to the study of religion with the intention of making explicit the religious and ethical discourses that characterize contemporary democratic life. Tran thus labels Stout's expressivist position as a "democratic expressivism,"[18] intent as it is on explaining the discursive practices of democracy according to the "expressive rationality" of Brandomian philosophy (DT 12).

Taylor has consistently opposed rationalist philosophy throughout his career, beginning with his Heideggerian critique of Hegelian rationalism in *Hegel* (1975), and continuing on through a number of his writings on phenomenology. I trace this line of argument in his work up to his most recent publications in which he engages with Brandom's philosophy. In "Language not Mysterious?" (2011) and *The Language Animal* (2017), Taylor opposes Brandom's "assertoric" conception of language on the grounds that it incorrectly posits that language is totally reducible to rational language games. The assertoric paradigm is contrasted by Taylor with the "disclosive," in reference to how language "discloses" the world to human beings. As I argue, disclosure is a key term of art in Taylor's rejection of Brandom's pragmatic expressivism, as it encapsulates the revelatory aspect of language. Specifically, it names how human beings

[17] Robert Brandom, "Asserting," *Nous* 17, no. 4 (1983): 637.
[18] Tran, "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," 541.

must encounter language in a spirit of openness in order to discover important things about the world. For this reason, Taylor appeals to the languages of art, especially music and poetry, that do not "assert" things about the world, but rather "disclose" or reveal them.

I suggest that Taylor's Romantic stance against Brandom's and Stout's pragmatic expressivism has another aspect, regarding the role of metaphysics and ontology. In chapter 2, I turn to discuss how Stout rejects metaphysics for its supposed hubris in attempting to define and describe the structure of the world. Stout's pragmatic anthropocentrism wants to limit religious and ethical discourse to discussion of social-practical matters; its concern is strictly with the "this-worldly." I note how Stout tries to salvage theology on the grounds that it need not be a metaphysics, but describe how this attempt fails from a Taylorean perspective. As Taylor argues in "A Catholic Modernity?", acknowledging the radically transcendent serves as a horizon of possibility for a spiritual alternative to exclusive humanism. Stout criticizes this argument on the grounds that Taylor's appeal to his Catholic theology is not persuasive to those who do not hold such theological commitments. I defend Taylor against Stout by noting that Stout's concept of "immanent critique" should not apply to the religious arguments made by Taylor. Indeed, as Stout argues elsewhere, religionists should freely relate their theological commitments in public, in order to enrich civic discourse about such matters.

Stout makes a further error by suggesting that all attempts at metaphysics ultimately tend toward dogmatic assertions about theological and ontological truth. I offer a rejoinder to this stance with reference to Taylor's Romantic expressivist notion of "ontological indeterminacy," which he applies to interpretations of post-Romantic poets Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In the poetic work of these writers, the ontologies of traditional religion are articulated via the "subtler languages" of subjective expression and inner feeling. In the complex interplay

between religious doctrine and personal experience, Taylor finds more room to explore alternative expressions of theological realities than that found in pragmatist philosophy. In post-Romantic poetic expression, metaphysical language is accepted as a "provisional" way of articulating the human experience of the world, and as such, does not seek to rationally defend such articulations. Rather, these poetic expressions of metaphysics "convince us through moving us."[19]

In chapter 3, I conclude my comparative analysis of Taylor and Stout by shifting gears to consider the political implications of their work on religion and expressivism. Both authors critique John Rawls's idea of public reason for its unfair treatment of public religious expression. Stout directs his pragmatist conception of expressivism toward a full-scale criticism of Rawls's arguments, while Taylor provides a similar, yet less comprehensive critique. I note that in a recent work of political theory, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure adopt Rawls's notion of the "overlapping consensus" to formulate their claim for an "open" secularism. Although one commentator questionably announces this as a sign of Taylor's "Rawlsian turn,"[20] I consider how Taylor has nonetheless not sufficiently considered some of the internal inconsistencies in Rawls's work. Stout, I argue, provides a better critique of, and alternative to, Rawls's public reason theory. As Stout argues with reference to Brandom's Hegelian notion of "expressive freedom," religious arguments in the public sphere deserve a voice given the ethical advancements proposed by religious egalitarian freedom movements in

[19] Charles Taylor, "Romantic Poetics" (Unpublished manuscript, 2020), 47.

[20] Ronald Beiner, "Taylor, Rawls, and Secularism," in *Interpreting Modernity: Essays on the work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Daniel M. Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, and Jocelyn Maclure (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 87.

history. Stout's theoretical elaboration on this question is persuasive, and advances a compelling notion of what public reason can be outside of the Rawlsian social contract framework.

Note on Terminology

In this thesis, I employ a number of complicated terms that may seem underexplained in the context of the overall discussion. Chief among these are the concepts of "metaphysics" and "ontology" which feature most heavily in chapters 1 and 2, and are used to designate a division between the expressivisms of Taylor, on the one hand, and Brandom and Stout on the other. Following Taylor, I adopt these terms broadly and provocatively, as a way of contesting pragmatism's philosophical assumptions about the world. Following Taylor's notion of "ontological indeterminacy," I trace how the Romantic and post-Romantic poetic approach to "doing metaphysics" represents a challenge to the naturalist ontologies of Brandom and Stout. As Taylor argues in his forthcoming book, Romantic poetics always contain an "implicit provisional metaphysics" in place of more systematically developed cosmologies.[21] Such Romantic metaphysics, historically speaking, "self-consciously withheld a claim to be the final underlying story," as they instead sought to poetically articulate the synthesis between subjecthood and worldhood, the mysterious relationship between human beings and nature. As Taylor notes, one does not find rational argumentation for a definitive vision of the cosmos in Romantic and post-Romantic poetics. Instead, "the transfiguration effects of post-Romantic art convince us through moving us . . . These epiphanic invocations of order are like flashes of insight which are incomplete, and, in the nature of things, ultimately uncompletable, not matter

[21] Taylor, "Romantic Poetics," 43.

how much they may be further elaborated."[22] I trace the implications of these comments by Taylor in the background of my exposition of his Romantic expressivism.

Metaphysics and ontology are discussed in tandem with another set of terms, what I label as the conflict between pragmatic "anthropocentrism" and Taylor's Romantic "nonanthropocentrism." These opposing concepts refer to another aspect of the disagreement between Taylor's and Stout's philosophical positions, insofar as they designate how one can approach the issue of knowing the world. The division, as I see it, is between understanding the world as conceptually enframed—as ultimately explainable and graspable by human concepts—and alternatively, as revealed *to* human beings. More colloquially, this could be seen in terms of alternative "human-centric" and "world-centric" perspectives. Brandom and Stout, for their part, take the anthropocentric route—Stout for example refers to the "social-practical encompassment of the natural world"[23]—while Taylor affirms the nonanthropocentric ontology of the Romantics. For Taylor, Romantic authors resisted uses of language that sought to rationally encapsulate the world. Rather, they developed creative languages that are open to revelation from the world, from external powers that impinge upon the poet. As Taylor argues, post-Romantic poetic works are "ontologically indeterminate" in that they implicitly deny the possibility of a fixed ontological reading. They are nonanthropocentric insofar as they displace human-centered perspectives (which are presupposed by pragmatism) and open up language to the unpredictability of revelation and inspiration.

[22] Ibid., 47.
[23] Jeffrey Stout, "What Is It That Absolute Knowing Knows?" *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 2 (2015): 178.

Chapter 1 | Taylor's Romantic Critique of Pragmatic Expressivism

1.1 | Robert Brandom's Rationalist Pragmatic Expressivism

Stout notes in a book chapter published two years before *Democracy and Tradition* that "Brandom must now be counted as the most important American philosopher in my generation to describe himself as a pragmatist."[24] This is presumably why Stout felt it necessary in this essay "to introduce Brandom's work to a religious studies audience," given the methodological significance that pragmatism has for Stout's theorization of religion. Stout's positive appraisal of Brandom's pragmatic expressivism—as well as his appropriation of it for his own expressivist account of religion in *Democracy and Tradition*—stands in direct contrast to Taylor's Romantic critique of Brandom's work. To better understand Stout's expressivist account of religious discourse in contrast to Taylor's, I will proceed by outlining the general shape of Brandom's pragmatic expressivist project in view of Taylor's critique of it. This will allow me to provide a more detailed picture of the conflict between Taylor's and Stout's expressivisms, in terms of their competing conceptions of religious expressivity.

In *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (2000), Brandom shows how his inferentialist pragmatism is distinct from that of the classical American pragmatists. In contrast to pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey, who sought to give an empirical account of the practical capabilities of human beings, Brandom gives an analytical account of human discursivity, most significantly in the domain of reason-giving. A fundamental feature of Brandom's pragmatism is his emphasis on the way in which reasoning is primarily a practical ability, and only secondarily a theoretical capacity. His is a "conceptual pragmatism" which

[24] Stout, "Radical interpretation and pragmatism," 25.

provides "an account of knowing (or believing, or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to *do* something."[25] For Brandom, the "knowing that" or "explicit" kind of knowledge is explanatorily subordinate to the "knowing how" or "implicit" kind of knowledge; the first can only be explained in view of the second. According to his theory, human linguistic practices are a fundamentally practical set of abilities. The advent of philosophical theorizing about language only then makes explicit what is implicit in such social-discursive practice.

The key social-practical form of discourse that Brandom hopes to make explicit with his pragmatic linguistic theory is found in, using a phrase he borrows from Wilfred Sellars, "the game of giving and asking for reasons." Brandom argues that within the social space of giving and asking for reasons, expressing a linguistic claim always entails endorsing "a kind of *commitment* the speaker's *entitlement* to which is always potentially at issue."[26] Commitment and entitlement function for Brandom as the two normative statuses that govern the linguistic practices of "all *rational* communities—all of those whose practices include the game of giving and asking for reasons."[27] Committing oneself to an assertion involves claiming rational entitlement to its conceptual content. This entitlement can either be challenged by counter-assertions, or deferred to without challenge. Hence the game of giving and asking for reasons can continue on with all participants as autonomous score-keepers, keeping track of each other's commitments and entitlements on the basis of the reasons given and received between the "players."

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[25] Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.
[26] Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 193.
[27] Ibid., 214-5.

Stout uses the metaphor of non-officiated sport to illustrate Brandom's score-keeping model of discourse: "In sandlot baseball there are no umpires. In street soccer there are no referees. The players keep track of runs or goals and of how well everyone played."[28] For Stout, ethical discourse serves as a particularly salient example of how the game of giving and asking for reasons can be played without reference to a single governing authority: "For the same reasons that baseball can be played on the sandlots and soccer can be played on the streets, ethical discourse can retain an objective dimension without prior agreement on a single scorekeeper. In ethics, as in most other forms of objective discourse, we are all keeping score." Stout endorses Brandom's theory of language for its avoidance of both the Charybdis of subjectivism—as Stout suggests, such "deontic scorekeeping" encourages "attentiveness to evidence and an attempt to avoid being influenced by wishful thinking"—as well as the Scylla of positing a singular authority to function as the guardian of discursive correctness. Thus, he writes, "Brandom's theory shows that a discursive practice can be objective . . . without being construed on an authoritarian model of scorekeeping." Such an objective yet democratic form of discursive practice is particularly valuable as "in a pluralistic society, where no single scorekeeper is recognized by all ethical discoursers, it should still be possible in principle to make sense of being entitled to commitments and of making commitments that are correct in content."

Stout correctly locates the strength of Brandom's rational language-game theory in its application to the diverse and messy "ethical and religious discursive practices" of contemporary Western societies, in which no official interpretation of ethics or religion prevails. However, my question concerns how far one can take a Brandomian approach to expressivism in regards to the

[28] Stout, "Radical interpretation and pragmatism," 40-1.

status of contemporary religious discourse. While Stout is right to see the potential in Brandom's philosophy for clarifying the pragmatic basis of our discursive practices—he convincingly demonstrates this in his application of pragmatic expressivism to the issue of "religious reasons in political argument"[29]—I want to suggest that there are serious limits to Brandom's expressivism that Stout does not acknowledge. I argue that these limitations emerge in consideration of poetic languages that defy the rule-bound nature of conventional social language games. This is where Taylor's Romantic expressivism provides an alternative set of resources for conceptualizing the possibilities for religious expression in contemporary society. By contrast, as I hope to now show, Brandom's and Stout's critiques of Romanticism close them off to the poetic-expressive dimensions of religious language that Taylor tries to keep open.

1.2 | Brandom's Critique of Romantic Expressivism

Ultimately, Brandom links his conceptual pragmatism and his inferential account of social-discursive practice to a rationalist conception of expressivism. What is specific to rationalist expressivism, as opposed to the expressivism of the Romantics, is that the ability to express something in language is fundamentally (and not incidentally) connected with being able to provide reasons for one's expressions. Brandom argues that his expressivism is rationalist "in that it understands *expressing* something, making it *explicit*, as putting it in a form in which it can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*: a form in which it can serve as both premise and conclusion in *inferences.*"[30] Romantic expressivism, by contrast, "takes as its initial point of departure the process by which inner becomes outer when a feeling is expressed by a gesture."[31]

[29] The title of chapter 3 in *Democracy and Tradition* where Brandom's theory is given its fullest treatment in Stout's work. I analyze the strengths of Stout's usage of Brandom in my third chapter.
[30] Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 11.
[31] Ibid., 8.

Brandom thinks that this model of expressivism is too simplistic, at least insofar as it "will not seem to offer a particularly promising avenue for construing the genus of which conceptual activity is a species." In other words, an expressivism that cannot satisfactorily account for the issue of conceptual expressions in a language is theoretically deficient. Rationalist expressivism is, on Brandom's account, a more philosophically sophisticated successor to "the sort of expressivism Herder initiated," as its concern lies not with "transforming what is inner into what is outer but of making *explicit* what is *implicit*."

Brandom is further suspicious of the Romantic expressivist aim of, in his words, "conceptualizing the unconceptualized," which he thinks "has given rise to a familiar panoply of philosophical pathologies."[32] This disdain for the Romantic project of poetically articulating that which cannot be expressed in rational language is characteristic of Brandom's Hegelianism. In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel rejects the kind of Romantic philosophy "which holds itself to be too good for the concept and which through this deficiency takes itself to be an intuitive and poetical thinking, trades in the arbitrary combinations of an imagination which is quite simply disorganized by its own thoughts – it trades in constructions that are neither fish nor fowl, neither poetry nor philosophy."[33] Although Brandom acknowledges Hegel's debt to the Romantics, noting that "Hegel's interest in the significance of inference in semantics" emerges out of "the insights of the Romantic expressivists,"[34] he commends Hegel for developing a rationalist expressivism that seeks conceptual clarity against the apparent obscurantism of Romantic thought.

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[32] Ibid., 16.
[33] G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), §68.
[34] Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 92.

Brandom's Hegelian antipathy toward the poetic thrust of Romantic expressivism is echoed and approved by Stout. Transposing Brandom's philosophical concerns to his own project of democratic expressivism, Stout argues that "public philosophy . . . is an exercise of expressive rationality" (DT 12). He clarifies in a footnote to this statement that the concept of "expressive rationality" he is advocating for is indebted to Brandom and Hegel, and that it is, like them, opposed to Romanticism: "The Sellars-Brandom form of expressivism began to take shape in Hegel's reaction against precisely this aspect of Romantic antirationalism, which he diagnosed as "*Begeisterung und Trubheit*" (ardor and muddiness) early in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*" (DT 352n11). We see here Stout's alliance with Brandom both in regards to the Hegelian suspicion toward the Romantic critique of reason, as well as in the concomitant valorization of "expressive rationality," or in Brandom's term, "rationalistic expressivism."[35]

In an earlier book, *Ethics after Babel,* Stout expresses a similar sentiment, arguing that an overly eager identification with Romanticism "makes the spectres of 'relativism' and 'irrationalism' inevitable (EB 262). He attributes this failure of Romantic thought to its "preference for making over finding" (EB 261); specifically, in its misdirected emphasis on creative expression over that of rational reflection. Despite claiming this, he admits that a *rapprochement* between Romantic and Enlightenment forms of knowing—stereotyped by Richard Rorty in the figures of the "strong poet" and "objective scientist"—could successfully moderate the enthusiasm of Romanticism. For Stout, this means "adopting a language in which it makes sense to say that making and finding are equally present in the work of the poet, the scientist, and the moralist," as well as locating "a kind of *praxis* in which poetic means and

[35] Brandom, *Articulating Reasons,* 23.

objective constraints have a place" (EB 262-3). Despite his later sympathies with Brandom's aversion toward the Romantics, Stout appears willing to moderate his stance toward them, at least in this earlier text.

Brandom, for his part, remains utterly opposed to Romantic influence within philosophy. He suggests that the Romantics are notorious "for their rejection of the significance [the Enlightenment] assigns to reason. They sought to displace the general demarcational emphasis on giving and asking for reasons or inquiring after truth."[36] Ultimately, Brandom laments, the Romantic movement "came to rest in an esteem for feeling and inarticulate empathy and enthusiasm."[37] This focus on the inchoate "feeling" that underlies human expressivity is uninteresting and misdirected for Brandom. On his rationalist account, the basis of language use is found in the social practice of providing reasons for one's commitments, and asking others that they provide reasons for theirs. Affective poetic idioms should therefore only feature in the distant background when ranking the most salient features of language use, as poetic language is not straightforwardly invested in such practical forms of discourse. Romantic philosophy, thus preoccupied with the poetic and not the practical, can only provide "inarticulate empathy" and not the finely honed analytical judgements of Kant, nor the dialectically sophisticated socio-historical insights of Hegel.[38]

It is in Brandom's work on the latter figure that his triumphalist tone regarding the expressive powers of philosophical rationalism becomes most clear. While Hegel has featured

[36] Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 92.
[37] Ibid., 92-3.
[38] For Brandom's extended account of these German idealists, see his essay "Animating Ideas of Idealism: A Semantic Sonata in Kant and Hegel," in *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

prominently in Brandom's work from early in his career,[39] the most significant publication in this respect is his recent monograph *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology. Here, Brandom endorses what he sees as Hegel's "expressively progressive" account of rationality in the *Phenomenology*, praising how Hegel tracks the historical development of concepts as they emerge in ever more sophisticated philosophical description. Brandom explains Hegel's method of phenomenology in these philosophically progressivist terms: "A phenomenology is a recollected, retrospectively rationally reconstructed history that displays the emergence into explicitness of what becomes visible as having been all along implicit in an *expressively progressive* sequence of its ever more adequate appearances."[40] Although Brandom's interpretation (as I've already mentioned) is nominally cognizant of Hegel's indebtedness to the Romantics—he here describes Hegel as "a romantic rationalist, who aims to synthesize Enlightenment cheerleading for modernity and Romantic critiques of it"[41]—this acknowledgement is greatly overshadowed by Brandom's singular focus on the expressively progressive march of reason through history that inheres in Hegel's thought.

While Taylor diverges from Brandom's reading of Hegel on some interpretive and historical details—for instance in Brandom's attempt to conform Hegel's ideas to a naturalist and non-metaphysical position[42]—the key aspect of Hegel on which they both agree, is that he ultimately privileges the expressive power of rationalist philosophy over the representational

[39] Brandom's comments about Hegelian "expressive freedom" in an early journal article are particularly important for Stout's expressivist account of religious expression in *Democracy and Tradition*. Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1979).
[40] Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 28-9. Emphasis mine.
[41] Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, 472.
[42] As Taylor frankly admits, "I don't think that a 'naturalistic' or 'unmysterious' account of the mature Hegel is possible." Charles Taylor, "Brandom's Hegel," in *Reading Brandom: On* A Spirit of Trust, ed. Gilles Bouché (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 201.

expressions of art and religion. The difference is that while Brandom approves of this hierarchy, Taylor is quite critical of it.[43]

Nicholas H. Smith has commented on Taylor's divergence from Hegel and Brandom on the question of the expressive value of philosophy in relation to art. It is here, Smith argues, that "Taylor parts company with Hegel's rationalist expressivism, and by implication with Brandom's."[44] In opposition to Hegel and Brandom, "Taylor claims that the work of art can give legitimate, non-conceptual and *non-substitutable* expression to a subject's intuitive sense of reality. Art is not just the self-awareness of Spirit 'in default of concepts', as Hegel supposed, but a genuine source of understanding that at least in some cases lies *beyond the reach* of the conceptual."[45] Smith furthermore suggests that "[Taylor's] expressivism amounts to a hermeneutics of finitude that contrasts with the Absolute Idealism Brandom finds congenial."[46] Smith emphasizes Taylor's resistance against the nearly limitless potential seen by Hegel and Brandom in the progressive powers of conceptual reasoning, particularly by reference to his privileging of artistic expression.

I hope to further explore Taylor's position on the limits of conceptual expression, but instead of turning immediately to his comments on art, I will first examine the role of phenomenology in Taylor's thought. I focus first on Taylor's phenomenological writings as they can help to substantiate his aesthetic resistance to Hegel's conceptualist paradigm of philosophy. This phenomenological work begins in *Hegel*, where Taylor develops a critique of Hegel's ideal

[43] Taylor writes that "the logic of Hegel's position," vis-à-vis his demotion of art beneath philosophy, is a "depressing prospect." Taylor, *Hegel,* 479.
[44] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," 153.
[45] Ibid., 153-4.
[46] Ibid., 154.

of "conceptual clarity"[47] by appeal to Heidegger's notion of "disclosure," a concept he returns to discuss in relation to his phenomenology of the "background" in both *Human Agency and Language* (1985) and *Philosophical Arguments* (1995). Taylor continues this Heidegger-like critique of Hegelian rationalism in his response to Brandom's work in the essay "Language not Mysterious?", which I later consider at length. In this essay, Taylor contests Brandom's "assertoric" paradigm of language theory with reference to the "disclosive dimension of language" that Taylor develops in his earlier work on Heideggerian disclosure. The discussion of disclosive expression will allow me to return to the question of art, as Taylor identifies both poetry and music as prime examples of non-assertoric expressions that "disclose" or "make manifest" crucial features of ethical and spiritual life. I therefore now turn to a brief exegesis of Taylor's early phenomenological writings in order to better explicate his Romantic critique of Brandom.

1.3 | The Phenomenological Background to Taylor's Critique of Brandom

A decisive point of disagreement between Taylor and Brandom concerns the limits of what can be made explicit in language. While Brandom's mature work has been preoccupied with the task of "making it explicit" through the deployment of philosophical "metaconcepts,"[48] Taylor has demonstrated suspicion with such philosophical theory since his early critical work on Hegel. While Brandom holds out the Hegelian hope that one might, through philosophy, be able to explicitly conceptualize that which remains implicit in discursive practice, Taylor instead postulates that the drive to achieve ever-greater explicitness must always fail despite itself.

[47] Taylor, *Hegel*, 476.

[48] For Brandom, metaconcepts are concepts that philosophically explicate practical conceptual activity. He identifies two primary categories of metaconcepts: "alethic modal concepts, on the empirical side of cognition, and deontic normative concepts, on the practical side of intentional action." Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, 5.

Against Hegel and Brandom, and with Michael Polanyi and Heidegger, Taylor argues that "even a clear descriptive language, in which our most explicit, distinct, unambiguous thoughts may be couched, has, as one way of classifying reality among others . . . a host of implications of which we can never be fully aware. And these form the horizon of the unclear, the non-focal, which surrounds our explicit consciousness."[49] The luminous workings of descriptive language are, for Taylor, always contrasted with the dark horizons against which language must inevitably appear.

Taylor suggests instead the substitute notion of "disclosure" (borrowing from Heidegger's "*Erschlossenheit*"[50]), which for him better encapsulates the task of articulation. Disclosing something, as opposed to "making it explicit," highlights the omnipresence of the murky background against which all of our articulations occur: "Disclosure is invariably accompanied by hiddenness; the explicit depends on the horizon of the implicit."[51] Taylor thus reverses the priority of the implicit and the explicit as they occur in Brandom's thought. Whereas the latter's theory travels from implicit pragmatics to the explicitness of concepts, Taylor instead explains the place of rational language as perpetually encompassed and befogged by the murky context of implicit experience; what he calls the "background." Making it explicit, for Taylor, cannot be such a straightforward task as Brandom wants it to be.

This notion of the "background" proves central for Taylor's phenomenological argument concerning the limits of language, as it allows him to picture the finite and fallible nature of human reason. In *Philosophical Arguments*, Taylor clarifies what he means by the phenomenological image of a "background":

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[49] Taylor, *Hegel*, 475.
[50] Taylor notes the Heideggerian lineage of this term in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 270.
[51] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 96.

> When we find a certain experience intelligible, what we are attending to, explicitly and expressly, is this experience. The context [or "background"] stands as the unexplicated horizon within which . . . this experience can be understood. To use Michael Polanyi's language, it is subsidiary to the focal object of awareness; it is what we are 'attending from' as we attend to the experience.[52]

There are two conditions for the existence of the background: (1) it must be an object of awareness, (2) but only in the context of what it reveals, and so can never be the object of awareness directly. Taylor explains the first condition this way: "the background is what I am capable of articulating, that is, what I can bring out of the condition of implicit, unsaid contextual facilitator."[53] Although this could imply that the background is itself knowable, to the extent that it can be articulated, Taylor clarifies that, per the second condition, "the idea of making the background completely explicit, of undoing its status as background, is incoherent in principle." The reason for this is that "the background is what arises with engaged agency. It is the context of intelligibility of experience for this kind of agent." To assess the background as an object of consideration itself means to disengage from the background; an ideal perhaps for Hegel and Brandom, but from Taylor's phenomenological perspective an impossibility. Taylor thus posits "the paradoxical status of the background": "It can be made explicit, because we aren't completely unaware of it. But the expliciting itself supposes a background. The very fashion in which we operate as engaged agents within such a background makes the prospect of *total* expliciting incoherent."[54]

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[52] Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 68-9.
[53] Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 69.
[54] Ibid., 70. Emphasis mine.

This theme is also taken up, albeit in a slightly different way, in Taylor's writings on selfhood and morality in *Sources of the Self*. The issue here concerns the necessity of self-interpretation in the context of discovering one's moral orientation to the world. Again, as in his earlier work, Taylor strongly emphasizes the limits of language in "expliciting"; in this context however, the problem is not with making the world explicit, but our moral language: "the self's interpretations can never be fully explicit. Full articulacy is an impossibility. The language we have come to accept articulates the issues of the good for us. But we cannot have fully articulated what we are taking as given, what we are simply counting with, in using this language" (SS 34). Although not specifically couched in the phenomenological language of the "background," the similar thrust of Taylor's thoughts here reinforces his doubts expressed elsewhere about the potentials for total rational explication. Although it is possible to "try to increase our understanding of what is implicit in our moral and evaluative languages"—and, as we have seen with Brandom, "this can even be an ideal"—the finite nature of our questioning means that "articulation . . . can never be completed. We clarify one language with another, which in turn can be further unpacked, and so on." The centrality of this concern for Taylor thus runs across the spectrum of his early works: from *Hegel*, to *Human Agency and Language* and *Philosophical Arguments*, and finally, to *Sources of the Self*.

In sum, the significance of the concept of the "background" for connecting Taylor's phenomenological thought to his philosophy of language—especially as seen in his Romantic critique of the limits of rational language—should not be understated. Indeed, as I hope to show, it can be used to bridge Taylor's critique of Brandom's expressivism to a parallel contestation of Stout's conception of the expressive status of religion in modernity. If Taylor's notion of the "background"—and the non-rational expressions of poetic thought capable of "disclosing" this

background—can be shown to trouble Brandom's assumptions about the paradigmatically rational status of language use in general, it can then be applied to censure Stout's argument about the rational status of religious language in particular. While I attempt to formulate such a Taylorean critique of Stout's rationalist conception of religious language in chapter 2, I first turn to examine how Taylor contests Brandom's pragmatic expressivism in a number of important recent works. This will provide the philosophical basis for my Taylor-inspired criticism of Stout's account of religious expressivity in the next chapter.

Taylor's critique of Brandom begins with an early foray against his work in the essay "Language not Mysterious?". Following this, in his most recent monograph, *The Language Animal*, Taylor picks up where he left off in the earlier essay and fills out the details of this critique by reference to his more fully-worked out alternative picture of language. I begin my analysis of Taylor's assessment of Brandom by looking at how he develops a critique of Brandomian inferentialism by reference to the comparative strengths of his own Romantic theory of language in "Language not Mysterious?". I then go on to examine Taylor's related critique of Brandom in *The Language Animal*, showing how Taylor's "expressive-constitutive" conception of language gives a better overall picture of our linguistic practices than Brandom's rationalist pragmatic expressivism, specifically in relation to aesthetic, metaphysical, and theological disclosure. As I have already mentioned, this will provide the theoretical groundwork for my Taylorean critique of Stout's pragmatic treatment of religious expressivity in chapter 2.

1.4 | Taylor's Critique of Brandom in "Language not Mysterious?"

In "Language not Mysterious?", Taylor argues that there is an essentially mysterious aspect to language that cannot be explained away by rationalist language theory. His argument is framed around the question of the "mystery" of language because of a remark made by Brandom

in *Making it Explicit* that the rational norms that govern our language use are "neither supernatural nor mysterious" (LM 49).[55] Brandom argues that norms, while "not objects in the causal order," are nonetheless real, in the everyday sense that the rules of baseball exist and are normatively efficacious for those who play it. Stout makes a similar suggestion when, explaining how social practices "encompass" natural objects (like Brandom, appealing to the example of baseball[56]), he argues that "*there is nothing mysterious* about this social-practical encompassment of the natural world."[57] In this respect, I want to read this essay by Taylor not only in reference to Brandom's denial of the mysteries of language, but also in view of Stout's own rejection of such mystery. This question of whether language ought to be thought of as "mysterious" is a major locus of disagreement between Taylor and Brandom/Stout; a place where the *pathos* of the former's Romanticism collides with the naturalist temperament of the latter duo's pragmatism. After detailing Taylor's critique of Brandom's philosophy of language in this vein, I pick up on the ontological and theological resonances of this conflict between Taylor's and Stout's positions in chapter 2.

Taylor begins his assessment of Brandom by praising the "Wittgensteinian thrust" in Brandom's philosophy, what he also calls the "multidimensional holism" of Brandom's thought, and the concomitant "critique of the atomism which is implicit in the mainstream post-Cartesian epistemology" (LM 39). What Brandom's critique of atomism amounts to is an understanding of

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[55] Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, 626.

[56] P. Travis Kroeker has questioned Stout's reliance on sports examples throughout his work: "Stout's vision of ethics as social practice tends to focus on sports . . . not politics or religion or art for its exemplars." P. Travis Kroeker, "Messianic Ethics and Diaspora Communities: Upbuilding the Secular Theologically from Below," in *Religious Voices in Public Places*, ed. Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113. This is perhaps motivated by Stout's reliance on Brandomian language-game theory; or possibly too by their joint suspicion of the poetic sublime, which is easily contrasted by the inherently practical nature of sport.

[57] Jeffrey Stout, "What Is It That Absolute Knowing Knows?" *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 2 (2015): 178. Emphasis mine.

language not as built up from isolated terms, but rather as constituted by the practical inferential dealings we have with the world. According to Taylor, Brandom admirably "dethrones representation as the primary building-block of thought and language. What is crucial is inferences" (LM 40). Taylor also sees a general affiliation between Brandom's and the German Romanticist Herder's views on language. Like Herder, Brandom thinks that words cannot merely serve as isolated representations of objects in the world; rather, languages must encompass whole frameworks of meaning to be intelligible.[58]

While Taylor approves of Brandom's holistic approach to theorizing language, the critique he develops concerns how Brandom seeks to explain the most essential aspect of the human language capacity through his practical-inferential linguistic model; what Taylor calls "the everyday fact-establishing and practical package" (LM 42).[59] According to Brandom, the kind of linguistic move that grounds all others is assertion.[60] Asserting something, making a claim or judgement, is the starting point for all other kinds of use of language and without which, on Brandom's account, there would not even be a linguistic capacity. In this respect we might note that, although commending the Wittgensteinian aspect of his project, Taylor fails to mention Brandom's explicit rejection of Wittgenstein's picture of language as a "maze" from the *Philosophical Investigations*[61]:

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[58] Brandom argues that "inferentialist semantics is resolutely *holist*. On an inferentialist account of conceptual content, one cannot have *any* concepts unless one has *many* concepts." Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 15.

[59] A phrase that resonates with a formulation Stout provides in an early paper: "the evidence-inference-action game of thought." Jeffrey Stout, "Metaethics and the Death of Meaning: Adams' Tantalizing Closing," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 6, no. 1 (1978): 6.

[60] "No sort of speech act is as important for philosophers to understand as assertion. Assertion of declarative sentences is the form of cognitive discourse, and is the fundamental activity in which linguistic meaningfulness is manifested." Robert Brandom, "Asserting," *Nous* 17, no. 4 (1983): 637.

[61] "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 19.

> By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language (discursive practice) has a *center;* it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. They are not on a par with other 'games' one can play. They are what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking.[62]

Brandom unequivocally declares that assertion is the only game in town when it comes to theoretically establishing the basis upon which all of our linguistic practices rest. Denying the "indiscriminately egalitarian picture presented by contemporary neo-Romantic theorists,"[63] Brandom argues that "discursive activities are intelligible in principle only against the background of the core practices of inference-and-assertion."

Taylor contrasts Brandom's "assertoric" paradigm of language theory to what he calls the "disclosive." For Taylor, "a pure case of the disclosive would be where we use language, or some symbolic form to articulate and thus make accessible to us something—a feeling, a way of being, a possible meaning of things—without making any assertion at all" (LM 42). Taylor cites a piano concerto by Chopin as a prime example of disclosive expression.[64] Although invoking a piece of music and not a linguistic phrase as a primary example of the disclosive dimension of

[62] Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 14-5.
[63] Brandom here refers to Derrida, but we could imagine him directing this line at Taylor.
[64] Fantaisie-Impromptu in C♯ minor.

language is perhaps an unusual place to begin to critique Brandom's philosophy, it is illustrative of the kind of Romantic sensibility that Taylor wants to cultivate in contrast to rationalist language theory. Such a piece of music obviously cannot "assert" anything within a "fact-establishing" language game. Instead, as Taylor avers, it "articulates a certain as yet indefinable longing; it draws me into it, and makes it part of my world."[65] Ultimately, he writes, within Chopin's piece "a human possibility is articulated and disclosed . . . but nothing at all is asserted" (LM 42).

In *The Language Animal,* Taylor also turns to music as a paradigmatic example of a kind of expression that does not "assert" anything, but that nonetheless discloses something about the world. "Music," Taylor writes, "*says* something; in the sense not of assertion but of portraying through expression" (LA 244). The important feature of musical expression for Taylor is that, in the experience of listening to it, a definite vision of the world is imparted, even though this might be very hard to articulate. Although this vision will be idiosyncratic to the individual hearer, the nature of experiencing the music is that "of hearing something *expressed*." Moreover, the emotional revelations supplied by music—e.g., in a piece of music that gestures toward some utopic place of fulfillment—seem to indicate that "these hitherto unsuspected regions of experience are there, accessible; the magic casements open onto *something*. Some vision is imparted" (LA 246). In this discussion of music, Taylor ultimately wants to "align our best phenomenology with an adequate ontology," namely, by producing a suitable account of the world based on the most faithful description we can give to our experience of it (SA 609). This

[65] The strong sentiment expressed by Taylor here calls into question Smith's claim that "it is misleading to say that Taylor himself is a 'Romantic' expressivist," and that "it is not a consequence of his expressivism to privilege feeling over thought or intuition over experience." Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," 152. The Romantic *feeling* of Taylor's work is nowhere so clear as in this statement. I later return to other issues I have with Smith's reading of Taylor.

search for an "adequate ontology" is apparent in Taylor's discussion of musical expression, as well as in his description of the "disclosive power" of poetic language more generally (LM 41). For Taylor, the disclosive power of language—and aesthetic expression more broadly—reveals *something* about the world, even if this revelation resists articulation in assertional description.

Beyond the disclosure found in aesthetic expressions such as music are the linguistic expressions used to articulate crucial features of human life. Taylor describes how the "serious attempt in prose to set out true judgements about the beauty of things (aesthetics), the virtues of life (ethics), or the nature of God (theology) has to draw on uses of language . . . which are disclosive" (LM 42). Although many things are of course linguistically *asserted* in these kinds of discourses, Taylor argues that they additionally constitute avenues of *disclosure* for aspects of life that can only be gestured toward, felt, or expressed incompletely. These disclosive expressions are "uses of language . . . which either without asserting at all, or going beyond their assertive force, make something manifest through articulating it" (LM 42). The point seems to be that even if an assertion is made in any of the discourses described above (aesthetics, ethics, theology), there will always be some excess or remainder that cannot be sutured by the assertoric expression. This is the excessive dimension of meaning which is made "manifest" through an articulation; as per Taylor's Heideggerian notion of the "background," it is that omnipresent aspect of experience not subsumable within assertible concepts.

It is important to note that Taylor is not rejecting Brandom's pragmatic framework of language *tout court*, but is rather pointing to what he sees as an excess in the utter privileging of practical inference-making in this theory. Smith suggests that "Taylor agrees with Brandom and the pragmatists that expression is a form of human activity," and that therefore on his view,

"expressions are subject to practical norms."[66] Taylor has before signalled approval of a core tenet of pragmatism that Brandom and Stout also endorse: that our position as observers can only be understood from the prior fact that we are always active agents in the world.[67] Smith notes that Taylor's departure from the pragmatic view of expression instead comes down to the issue of the creative role of language: "the decisive point for the expressivists that inform Taylor's understanding of expressivism is the role of expression in making something manifest."[68] For this reason, Taylor thinks that a satisfactory account of expression ought to include more than just the practical linguistic dimension, but must also incorporate mention of the transformative nature of language: its ability to create new modes of being, to initiate a moment of "conversion" from one existential possibility to another, [69] and most controversially, to reveal something about the way the world really is.

A key problem that Taylor sees in Brandom's appeal to the "self-sufficiency of fact-establishing language games" is that his approach is inarticulate about this transformative power of language in aesthetics and spirituality. It is in this sense of language as something one participates in, and is transformed by, that its essentially "mysterious" nature can be revealed. Appealing to the etymological root of the word "mystery" that concerns both "what is hidden" as well as the "process of initiation" that reveals the hidden thing, Taylor notes that implied in this

[66] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," 149.

[67] In the essay "What is Pragmatism?", Taylor admits that "perhaps I too, am some kind of pragmatist." A pragmatist at least according to the view that "we are from the very beginning at grips with the world, aiming at certain goals, purposes, seeking things desired, trying to fend off things feared. Our entire understanding of things comes to be framed only within this committed and active perspective." Charles Taylor, "What is Pragmatism?" in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgement: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 74.

[68] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," 150.

[69] In regards to the issue of how creative language can influence religious conversion, Taylor notes how "so many influential converts in the last two centuries have been writers and artists. Literature is one of the prime loci of expression of these newly-discovered insights" (SA 732).

dual sense of the term is the participatory element of being an embodied, active, and social language animal: "Something is a 'mystery' in this sense, when we can't come to understand it by taking a disengaged stance to it, applying already articulated concepts, but when we have to open ourselves to our experience of it, explore it by immersing ourselves in it" (LM 50). The examples Taylor refers to in this regard are the work of the anthropologist who must bracket their cultural assumptions in understanding the practices and discourses of another culture, as well as the dialogical ways in which we come to mutually appreciate works of art. What is required in these instances of participating in the mysteries of language—in "works of art, modes of human life, our relation to God"—is to engage in "a stance of openness and potential neologism,"[70] allowing oneself to be surprised in the course of navigating these discourses, or even to admit the failure of mere words to express what at some level must remain inexpressible.[71]

1.5 | Taylor's Critique of Brandom in *The Language Animal*

In Taylor's *The Language Animal*, this critique of Brandom is developed in relation to a more thoroughly worked-out alternative, in a "constitutive-expressive" account of language (LA 39). This constitutive theory of language, which Taylor attributes to a trio of Romantic thinkers—Herder, Hamann, and Humboldt (the "HHH")—is contrasted with the "designative-instrumental" theories that he associates with a number of early modern philosophers including

[70] Taylor is in particular impressed with the neologisms of Gerard Manley Hopkins; his "inscape" and "instress" for example (SA 760).

[71] There is perhaps an unacknowledged Augustinian debt in Taylor's appeal to the mysterious nature of language. See for example Augustine's comment on the paradox that when something is named "inexpressible" it is nonetheless expressed: "And we are involved in heaven knows what kind of battle of words, since on the one hand what cannot be said is inexpressible, and on the other what can even be called inexpressible is thereby shown to be not inexpressible." Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. Ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 104.

Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (the "HLC"). Broadly speaking, the constitutive theory stresses that language fundamentally "constitutes" human consciousness, and that human beings are thus irreducibly shaped by language. Taylor argues that the language ability is not reducible to mechanistic behavioural response to our environment, meaning that the "semantic dimension" makes possible a space for expressive freedom. Conversely, the designative theory hypothesizes that human beings *can* be conceived apart from language; speech on this account is a human invention brought about to accomplish specific tasks that would be impossible without it. Taylor opposes the bare instrumentality of this approach to the radically open-ended *creative* potential of language postulated by the HHH.

Implicit in the HLC theory is that language is merely an extension of certain natural behaviours (e.g., pointing at an object, making sounds), which demystifies the advanced uses (e.g., literature, poetry, etc.). Taylor argues that this view cannot account for the way in which language has uniquely shaped human beings and their creative powers of expression:

> We can't explain language by the function it plays within a pre- or extralinguistically conceived framework of human life, because language through constituting the semantic dimension transforms any such framework, giving us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships, and introduces a dimension of strong value. Language can only be explained through a radical discontinuity with the extralinguistic (LA 33).

Inhabiting the "semantic dimension" means that one is always already caught up in forms of symbolic meaning-making that are not explicable in terms of purely natural types of behaviour. Following Herder, Taylor argues that "linguistic awareness is of a different kind than the response-triggering mode; it's more a focused awareness of this object . . . It involves a kind of

gathering of attention which Herder describes as 'reflection,' or '*Besonnenheit*'" (9). Taylor links Herder's sense of the open attentiveness to phenomena made possible in *Besonnenheit* to Heidegger's notion of language as a place of "dwelling" for human beings (94). Claiming that the latter figure "draws heavily on the tradition of the HHH," Taylor notes Heidegger's emphasis on how "the thing" (*Das Ding*) in our environment cannot simply be typified as an "objectified entity . . . the focus of scientific study or the search for possible instrumental use."[72] Rather, "it is the locus of the full corona of liminal meanings, which it presents and invites us as language beings to explore" (LA 95). These comments support my earlier suggestion that Taylor's Heideggerian phenomenology is central to his Romantic opposition to the totalizing conceptual languages of Hegel and Brandom.

Continuing his analysis from "Language not Mysterious?", Taylor argues that the motivating factor behind rationalist language theories, whether in the pre-modern HLC or its post-Fregean proponents, such as represented by Brandom, is "the same concern for a reliable knowledge, *free of mystery*," which includes "belief in a *nonmysterious* depictive power by a semantic theory which relates our verbal descriptions to objects which are evident to all in the world" (LA 124, emphasis mine). This quest for a non-mysterious conception of language is connected with the "antimetaphysical drive" behind the analytic approach to semantics. For the philosophies of language that try to excise metaphysical or theological content from speech, "certain supposed realities [are] illusory or fraudulent, those postulated by religions for instance; or goods or values, like those of ethics or aesthetics, that [claim] an ontological grounding" (LA 121). The criterion of empirical verifiability, championed particularly by the logical positivists,

[72] For Heidegger's discussion of *Das Ding*, see: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

is a main driver of this "hygienic" approach, whereby our descriptive language can be sanitized of contaminating metaphysical statements (LA 124).

Taylor clarifies that "Brandom is no old-style positivist," insofar as he is "willing to accept that the regimented system of objectivist semantics may not be able to embrace all of the sayable" (LA 174). Brandom himself admits in a response to Taylor that "it might well be that issues of absolutely vital importance to human life can be addressed only by helping ourselves to considerations that go well beyond the rational side of our nature."[73] Despite Brandom's note of humility in regards to the potential limits of his rationalist approach, Taylor emphasizes that "[Brandom] nevertheless sees a point in the [rationalist] enterprise, in order to reveal something about those vocabularies which do connect, and those which don't. But it may be that the 'unaccessible' areas of normal speech are much bigger than he suspects." Brandom's philosophy, which seeks to make explicit all that remains implicit within our ordinary ways of talking and communicating, draws a sharp distinction between what can be conceptualized in speech and what cannot, dismissing the latter as irrelevant to a satisfactory account of language. Taylor is concerned that this demystifying strategy too quickly dismisses the many mysteries of language, particularly as expressed in those forms of speech that do not remain within the bounds of the naturalist ontology that Brandom's semantic theory presupposes.

Brandom is therefore guilty, from Taylor's perspective, for trying to "develop a language in which an (ontologically or epistemologically) respectable account of the world, in propositions which are susceptible where necessary of logical regimentation, can be cast" (LA 171). This linguistic rationalism neglects not only the metaphysical and theological languages

[73] Robert Brandom, "Reply to Charles Taylor's 'Language not Mysterious?'" in *Reading Brandom: On* Making it Explicit, ed. Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer (New York: Routledge, 2010), 303.

that Taylor wants to preserve, but also the more ordinary symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of every-day speech. We could imagine the ideal language that Brandom and other proponents of the post-Fregean HLC tradition would endorse as "a core of language games which concentrate on making and understanding assertions, within more or less fixed taxonomic frames, which can be relatively clearly and unambiguously determined to be true or false, even if one lacks the elements to do so now" (LA 172). Such a Brandomian "autonomous discursive practice" is not only undesirable for Taylor, but is also "a human impossibility" (LA 173).

We can see in Taylor's critique of Brandom both in "Language not Mysterious" and *The Language Animal* a similar aim of loosening the restrictive features of his rationalist language theory. This involves both a re-appreciation of the mysteries of language, inherent in the kinds of disclosure that accompany aesthetic expression, as well as a revivification of metaphysical/theological languages that do not abide by the rules of naturalist semantics. I will next turn to a brief response by Brandom concerning Taylor's critique in "Language not Mysterious?", and then conclude the chapter by critically considering Nicholas H. Smith's interpretation of the Taylor/Brandom debate.

1.6 | Brandom's Response

In his response to Taylor's critique in "Language not Mysterious?", Brandom suggests that his theory of language is not as restrictive as Taylor thinks it is. In particular, Brandom argues that he is not *such* a rationalist as to want to get rid of the "disclosive dimension" entirely, and concedes to Taylor that "it might well be that issues of absolutely vital importance to human life can be addressed only by helping ourselves to considerations that go well beyond the rational

side of our nature."[74] In admitting this point however, it appears that Brandom remains unmoved by Taylor's Romantic concern for emphasizing the irreducibly poetic dimension of language: "I draw a bright line between *conceptual* understanding and other kinds of symbolic disclosedness. And I do claim a distinctive kind of privilege for practices of giving and asking for reasons (which are, I claim, always also practices of making claims and offering descriptions and explanations)." Brandom thereby redoubles his commitment to his project, content with remaining within his rationalist paradigm of the philosophy of language.

Despite Brandom's equivocating admission that it "might well be" worthwhile to go beyond our rationality in "issues of absolutely vital importance to human life," I believe that his attempt to ameliorate the conflict between himself and Taylor does not hold. The point of Taylor's critique is that any philosophy which examines the significance of language and expression for human life must take into account *all* its forms, and not simply those rational forms that analytic philosophers such as Brandom prioritize. Furthermore, the point of departure for Taylor's essay—that normativity and language are not so easily demystified—is not addressed by Brandom in his response. I will now turn to critically explore Smith's interpretation of the Taylor/Brandom debate in terms of their conflicting expressivisms. While Smith is right in seeing the importance of expressivism for assessing their respective approaches to language, I argue that he ultimately misrepresents the substantive ontological and theological commitments Taylor brings to the table in this debate.

[74] Brandom, "Reply to Charles Taylor's 'Language not Mysterious?'" 303.

1.7 | Smith's Misreading of Taylor

Smith correctly notes that the issue of whether or not the source of our language and normativity is "mysterious" is central to Taylor's debate with Brandom. While "Taylor maintains that it is an open question whether the *norms* to which expressions are subject have a *human* or *non-human* source," Smith rightly states that "Brandom's expressivism settles this matter decisively in favor of the secular option."[75] Brandom's Hegelian commitment to the autonomy of the subject leads Smith to posit that, for him, "*authority* by way of expression rests on the *freedom* of those who participate in expressive practices themselves. The idea that the subject of expression is accountable to some non-human source of norms is anathema to this version of expressivism." The thoroughgoing anthropocentric character of Brandom's expressivist project is appropriately highlighted here by Smith.

Curiously, Smith omits mention of Taylor's theism in discussing the disagreement between Brandom and Taylor's respective expressivisms. Smith writes that a Taylorean expressivist would respond to Brandom by saying "that while the authority lent to expression is just a human, social matter, excellence by way of expression may require the acknowledgement of non-human sources of significance (such as the natural environment or other species)."[76] Although aptly drawing attention to Taylor's ecological concerns, Smith's comment strangely omits mention of his Catholic commitments that have focused his responses to naturalist and secularist ontologies. Ruth Abbey argues to the contrary that Taylor's open identification with his Catholic faith has in fact motivated his refusal of anthropocentric philosophies: "[Taylor] does not conceal his theism; rather he identifies it as one of the forces that drives him to question

[75] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor, 154.
[76] Ibid., 154.

anthropocentrism."[77] Taylor's theistic perspective, I will argue, leads him in the direction of poetic theological languages which can resist the pull of anthropocentric and "excarnating" paradigms of reason, such as proposed by Brandom and Stout.[78]

Smith's neglect of the *theological* resonances in Taylor's expressivism is coupled with a misreading of the role that *ontology* plays in his appeal to Romantic poetics. Although Smith is cognizant of Taylor's Romantic opposition to Brandom's positing of a strong human/nature binary, (Smith writes that Taylor "conceives the mind as inseparable from its incarnation in matter"[79]), it seems incongruous when he subsequently argues that "[Taylor] agrees with Brandom that the concept of nature has been so thoroughly disenchanted by the natural sciences that the project of recovering meaning in nature at the 'ontic' level—that is, at the levels at which objective scientific descriptions work and the metaphysical discourses that ground them—has had its day."[80] In Taylor's recent work on this question, his appeal to the "ontic indefiniteness" (LA 248) or "ontological indeterminacy" (SA 404, 757; CR 58-9) of Romantic poetics appears aimed, if not at formulating a positive project for "re-enchantment," then at least in resisting the slide to a further disenchantment of modernity.[81] Smith neglects not only this important ontological argument in Taylor's current thought, but also misrepresents what the "ontic level" means for him. From Taylor's Heidegger-inspired perspective, ontology does not merely refer to "objective" work done in philosophy or science that seeks to give logically and empirically

[77] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Teddington, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2000), 31.

[78] Taylor describes the "excarnation" of rationality as "the exaltation of disengaged reason as the royal road to knowledge" (SA 746).

[79] Smith, "Expressivism in Brandom and Taylor," 150.

[80] Ibid., 152.

[81] New directions in Taylor's work nonetheless promise a closer examination of what such a re-enchantment might entail. In his forthcoming book on Romanticism, he describes the Romantics poetic attempt at "reconnection" (with nature, the cosmos, the transcendent, etc.) as constituting various "phenomenologies of re-enchantment." Charles Taylor, "Romantic Poetics."

airtight accounts of nature, but just as crucially involves that aspect of inquiry that is concerned with fundamental human meanings.

In a recent interview by Michiel Meijer, when asked to define the word "ontology," Taylor gives this brief yet provocative answer: "Well, ontology is whatever there is, and 'what there is', interestingly enough, is this dimension of movement for human beings, different from simply how they feel, different from ordinary happiness and so on, and this is not just a projection."[82] In this description, ontology is not a strictly objective kind of inquiry (as a "dimension of movement *for* human beings"), but neither does it skew totally subjective (it is distinct from mere feeling, "not just a projection"). This answer problematizes Smith's assumption that Taylor views nature as thoroughly disenchanted, to the point where there is *no* possibility for a recovery of meaning at the "ontic" level. Rather, for Taylor, the investigation of ontology is inextricable from consideration of the human experience of "movement"; and if this answer if linked up with his other statements concerning the relation between ontology and poetic language—in the "ontic indefiniteness" or "ontological indeterminacy" entailing certain readings of Romantic poetry—then this reveals a much more complicated stance toward (dis)enchantment and the "mysterious" nature of language.

In the next chapter, I explore how the disagreement between Brandom and Taylor on the question of rational versus Romantic conceptions of language parallels a conflict between Stout and Taylor on the question of anthropocentric versus nonanthropocentric approaches to understanding religion and ethics. Taylor's assertion that ontology must skew between subjective and objective interpretations supports his broader attempt to justify the continued relevance for

[82] Michiel Meijer and Charles Taylor, "What Is Reenchantment? An Interview With Charles Taylor," in *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, ed. Michiel Meijer and Herbert De Vriese (New York: Routledge, 2021), 27.

metaphysical language. Clarifying this aspect of Taylor's position will allow me to bring Stout's work into the conversation, as Stout's attempt to develop an "ethics without metaphysics" stands in direct contrast to Taylor's metaphysical and theological characterizations of ethics.

All of this, I will ultimately argue, boils down to a conflict at the level of their divergent expressivist theories: while Stout wants to articulate a pragmatic expressivism that can describe the rational role for religious expression in democracy, following the theoretical parameters set by Brandom's project, Taylor's aims are to see how the insights of Romantic expressivism can go beyond a rationalist paradigm of religious expressivity to point to transcendent sources of meaning that are not reducible to naturalist ontology. For this purpose, I turn to Taylor's interpretations of the poetry of Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins. He sees strong resources in the works of these poets for contesting the reduction of language to mere pragmatics, as well as for opening a space for poeticized theological language in a secularized modernity.

Chapter 2 | The Expressive Value of Religion: Taylor's Defense of Theological Poetics Against Stout's Critique of Metaphysics

2.1 | Pragmatism and Anthropocentrism

In chapter 1, I have argued that Taylor's Romantic expressivism provides a fuller set of resources for considering the role of language in the spiritual lives of human beings than that allowed for in Brandom's pragmatic expressivism. I briefly alluded to Stout's approval of Brandom's pragmatic rationalism, and how this is paralleled by their agreement about the non-mysterious nature of language, and the way in which they understand the natural world as conceptually (or discursively) enframed. Taylor, as I showed, opposes this conceptualist understanding of the world in many of his texts, primarily by appeal to the phenomenological and poetic notion of disclosure; a conception of language as mysteriously revealing the world to us, as making manifest what cannot be known directly or rationally.

This disagreement between Taylor on the one hand, and Stout and Brandom on the other, can be characterized in terms of the notion of anthropocentrism. While the Taylor opposes anthropocentric descriptions of language—insofar as these emphasize the rational control that human beings wield through language—the latter duo appears committed to such an anthropocentric understanding of discursive practice; through the "social-practical encompassment of the natural world," as Stout puts it.[83] Taylor's theistic perspective is the route by which he opposes such an anthropocentric view, which is further aided by his account of Romantic expressivist poetics.

[83] Stout, "What Is It That Absolute Knowing Knows?" 178.

I begin chapter 2 by considering how Stout himself understands the vocation of pragmatism in relation to the question of anthropocentrism. Stout often seems to equivocate on this issue; while wanting to avoid the charge that pragmatism is guilty of "narcissism," he nonetheless appears unwilling to abandon the anthropocentric aspects of pragmatism necessitated by his characterization of "ethics as social practice."[84] He confirms this commitment to anthropocentrism in dialogue with the thought of fellow pragmatist Richard Rorty. Although Stout opposes the hyperbole of Rorty's claim that the pragmatic embrace of anthropocentrism requires the rejection of theism, his equivocation on this issue indicates that he agrees with Rorty, if not in rhetoric, then in substance. Stout tries to resolve the matter by defending the validity of non-metaphysical theism, while Rorty (rightly, in my opinion) argues that this is an impossibility—from his and Taylor's perspective, Christian theism is ineluctably tied to a certain metaphysical account of reality. It is metaphysical in the sense of claiming a transcendent status with regard to human knowledge; as something revealed to human beings, and not simply as socially constructed via our discursive practices. While Rorty thinks this is why religious perspectives in general cannot be philosophically respectable, Taylor argues that this revelatory aspect of religious expression is religion's greatest contribution to philosophical discourse, which is why he has developed a philosophy of language that seeks to explain the relevance and importance of disclosive religious expression. Stout, for his part, follows Rorty in doubting the revelatory aspect of religious language. He argues that the metaphysical visions of religion can be dispelled by a pragmatist analysis that uncovers the humanly constructed basis of ethics.

Stout's commitment to Rortyan anthropocentrism follows from his denunciation of metaphysical thought as "imaginative projection." I consider Stout's various critiques of

[84] The title of chapter twelve of *Democracy and Tradition*.

metaphysics in *Ethics after Babel* and *Democracy and Tradition* to be a sign of his rejection of Taylor's Romantic approach to language which, as I noted in chapter 1, keeps the metaphysical dimensions of language open. I consider two aspects of Taylor's thought that resist Stout's enclosure of metaphysical language: first, his theological arguments made in *A Catholic Modernity?*, and second, his discussion of the "ontological indeterminacy" he sees in the post-Romantic poetics of Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins—what he has more recently described as the Romantic approach of providing an "implicit provisional metaphysics" where traditional metaphysical formulations have fallen into disuse.[85] Consideration of the first topic will be helpful in clarifying some deficiencies in Stout's critique of *A Catholic Modernity?*, a task particularly useful for this thesis as Stout's review of Taylor's Marianist lecture is the longest published work that exists in connection between these two figures. Attention to the second will allow me to expand upon my picture of Taylor's Romantic expressivist conception of language begun in chapter 1, as I now direct it away from critique of Brandom's rationalist language theory, towards a challenge of Stout's anti-metaphysical (and anti-Romantic) pragmatist perspective.

Stout wants to defend a form of pragmatism that can remain resolutely anthropocentric without devolving into narcissism. His essay, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism," addresses this issue in response to Rorty's argument that pragmatists ought to bite the bullet in defense of narcissism, in order to fulfill pragmatism's destiny as the philosophical defender of individual self-reliance. Stout summarizes Rorty's stance as follows:

[85] Taylor, "Romantic Poetics," 43.

> His [Rorty's] point is that the most interesting and liberating thing in pragmatism is the boldly thorough character of its anthropocentrism. To compromise its anthropocentric account of inquiry—as a set of human activities answerable only to human interests—is to deprive pragmatism of its radical challenge to the received philosophical tradition and to the culture in which ideas from that tradition circulate.[86]

Stout agrees that mainline pragmatism generally endorses such an anthropocentric perspective, commenting that "all pragmatic accounts of inquiry accord some kind of philosophical priority to human practices, and thus involve some kind of anthropocentrism."[87] However, the danger is that if pragmatism cannot account for the way in which inquiry is responsible to a set of standards that exist beyond human interests, then it will become ineffective as a mode of philosophy. Such philosophical "narcissism," Stout writes, is the provenance of an anthropocentrism "that loses sight of the objective dimension of inquiry."[88] While Rorty proudly claims the title of narcissist (although he prefers to think of it as "self-reliance"[89]), Stout wants to articulate a more cautious "modest pragmatism"[90] that is humanly-centered in its interests, yet oriented toward the objective world in its methods.

Part of Stout's motivation in trying to retain Rorty's emphasis on the radically anthropocentric character of pragmatism, while avoiding the potential philosophical narcissism this entails, is to soften pragmatism's reaction to the claims of religion. While Rorty is

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[86] Jeffrey Stout, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism," in *New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 8.
[87] Stout, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right," 8-9.
[88] Ibid., 9.
[89] Jason Springs, ed., "Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 422-3.
[90] This formulation is provided in *Ethics after Babel*, 249-50, 264-5.

unapologetic in decrying the ill-effects he perceives in the existence of religious discourse in democratic society,[91] Stout alternatively seeks to carve out a space out for reasonable religious voices. However, I shall argue that Stout's method of doing this leads him to a theoretical impasse, as part of his strategy in justifying religious expression in secular society involves separating religion from its formulation in metaphysically and ontologically rich terms. While Stout wants to advocate for the presence of religion in the public sphere, he makes the case that it is first necessary to criticize the metaphysical commitments still clung to by religionists. This, I claim, leaves him untenably halfway between Rorty's anthropocentric pragmatism and Taylor's Romantic position, which states that theological and poetic forms of religious expression provide the most promising avenues for escaping the narrow perspective of pragmatist philosophy.

Stout's defense of anthropocentric pragmatism, and his subsequent critique of religiously-motivated metaphysical expression, are ultimately incompatible with his claim that pragmatism should be hospitable toward the reasonable public expression of religious ideas. Although Stout, to his credit, wants to be more permissive towards democracy's religious interlocutors than Rorty, he accomplishes this at the cost of draining religion of its most distinctive ontological content and, in the process, contradicts an earlier claim of his that "divorcing theology from the realm of ontological claims" ultimately makes "theistic vocabulary superfluous."[92] Although Stout recently argues that religious voices have made valuable interventions in resisting various forms of political domination (a point most forcefully made in

[91] For Rorty's critiques of religious expression, see: Richard Rorty, "Anti-clericalism and atheism," in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).
[92] Stout, *The Flight from Authority*, 147.

his Gifford lectures[93]), he seems unable to square his later political theory of religious discourse with this earlier assertion that for theological languages to remain distinctive, they ought not give up their substantive ontological commitments.

So, although Stout wants to soften Rorty's rhetoric that is launched against proponents of theism, he accomplishes this at the cost of advocating for a theism emptied of its most theologically substantive content, because drained of its metaphysical meaning. Rorty is therefore right to express doubt concerning Stout's assertion that "theological commitments need not be seen as a subset of metaphysical commitments."[94] Rorty broadly defines metaphysical knowledge as consisting in "accurate representation of what is the case independent of human needs and interests," which he thinks is unavoidably wedded to theistic construals of divine knowing. Rorty laments that Stout abandons the Brandomian social-practical discursive paradigm when he tries to accommodate theistic insights into his pragmatism.[95] Because Rorty finds the idea of "non-human knowers" preposterous, he denounces Stout's bridge-building attempts from pragmatism to theism.

Stout ultimately equivocates between Rorty's pragmatic anthropocentrism, on the one hand, and a theism-friendly democratic pluralism on the other. This results from his attempt to embody the stance of both pragmatic philosopher and democratic arbitrator, expounding on what he views as most philosophically true from the first perspective, and engaging in the

[93] Jeffrey Stout, "Religion Unbound: Ethical Religion from Cicero to King" (Lecture Series, University of Edinburgh, May 1-12, 2017), https://giffordsedinburgh.com/2017/05/01/lecture-one-religion-since-cicero/.
[94] Springs, ed., "Pragmatism and Democracy," 420. Cited from DT, 256.
[95] For example, see Stout's attempt to theologically defend the egalitarian discursive practices of democracy against Milbank's traditionalism, DT 104.

"cosmopolitan" task of deliberating across difference in the second.[96] Allen Dunn suggests that this dichotomy in Stout's thought presents itself in the form of two incompatible variations on pragmatism he prevaricates between. The first is a "practical pragmatism" that corresponds to the "modest" form of pragmatism Stout claims to champion. It limits itself to a criticism of strong versions of realism, and other forms of dogmatic metaphysical thought. Second is what Dunn calls Stout's "principled pragmatism," a rhetorical mode he shifts into when more vehemently condemning what he sees as the intellectual vice of *all* forms of metaphysical thought. "Principled pragmatism requires that we swear an oath against metaphysics," Dunn writes, "but practical pragmatism requires no such oath."[97]

Dunn questions why Stout is so critical of metaphysical commitments, from the perspective of principled pragmatism, and yet remains lenient toward theological positions that he deems non-metaphysical. Dunn argues that, following his own account of immanent critique, Stout should be permissive toward both theological *and* metaphysical discourses: "Stout's model of an *ad hoc* immanent criticism . . . necessarily stands free of his commitment to a specific form of modest pragmatism. Because it brackets moral premises, *ad hoc* criticism is as tolerant of metaphysical commitments as it is of pragmatism or religion."[98] In other words, Stout's stated commitment to a "freewheeling democratic exchange" (DT 85) appears to be contradicted in his censorious approach to metaphysical discourse. This is especially evident in his Feuerbachian argument that the substantive theological claims made by religionists can be better thought of as

[96] Ronald Kuipers refers to Stout's "liberal desire to accede to the cosmopolitan, tradition-transcending role of final arbiter of a pluralistic public sphere." I take up Kuipers' critique of Stout later in this chapter. Ronald A. Kuipers, "Stout's Democracy without Secularism: But is it a Tradition?" *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3, no.1 (2006): 87.
[97] Allen Dunn, "The Temptation of Metaphysics: Jeffrey Stout's Account of the Limits of Moral Knowledge," 303.
[98] Dunn, "The Temptations of Metaphysics," 303.

mere "imaginative projections" (DT 241-5). In this section of *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout appears (despite himself) to be a Rortyan anti-realist critic of theology and metaphysics.

Although Stout asserts against Rorty that pragmatism should remain open "to both theistic and anthropocentric interpretations,"[99] his description of theological argument as "imaginative projection" is made from a definitively anthropocentric perspective. This makes his attempts to position himself as a democratic advocate for the theologically-minded suspect, as his own secular pragmatism leaves him inarticulate about what religionists are actually describing and responding to in their appeals to spiritual reality, which I believe weakens his critique of Taylor's philosophy. Although I noted above that Stout wants to avoid Rorty's rhetoric of narcissism, he nonetheless follows him in positing the necessity for pragmatism's "humanistic self-reliance," summarizing its theological import as such: "Self-reliance, for Rorty, is a de-divinizing project in all matters that pertain to normative authority. It is a project that can be turned toward democratic ends, because it locates the source of all authority in human hands . . . But pragmatic self-reliance cannot, he thinks, be made compatible with the theist's insistence that God is the ultimate source of all authority."[100] Despite Stout's attempts to formulate a pragmatism *without* narcissism, he nonetheless stakes his claim on a pragmatism *with* self-reliance, which by Rorty's lights is essentially the same thing.

Rorty's critique of Stout's attempt to equivocate on pragmatism's stance toward theism thus illuminates the clear division between Taylor and Stout on this question. Taylor's attempt to develop a nonanthropocentric account of language that is hospitable to metaphysical and theological idioms, and inspired by resources found within Romantic poetics, is positioned

[99] Jeffrey Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010), 541.
[100] Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics," 540.

squarely against Stout's Rortyan (and Brandomian) anthropocentric pragmatism.[101] Although Stout is a worthy defender of the liberative political impacts of exemplary religious expression, his philosophical account of the desirability of eliminating metaphysical content from religious thought is less easy to defend from a Taylorean perspective.

2.2 | Stout's Critique of Metaphysics

Stout begins his criticism of metaphysics—more specifically, his criticism of metaphysical approaches to religious ethics—in his 1988 book *Ethics after Babel*. He follows Rorty's lead in this endeavor, lauding the latter's description of pragmatism's virtuous austerity in refusing the temptation of metaphysics. For Stout, philosophers who seek "something deeper" (metaphysically speaking) when attempting to articulate an ethical perspective are mistaken. He thus defends Rorty's claim that "problems we are tempted to regard as perennial and eternal" are better understood as historical problems, locatable to when a "particular vocabulary took hold among the intellectuals at a certain date" (EB 255). Debunking metaphysical pretensions is therefore possible by appeal to a thoroughgoing pragmatic historicism,[102] revealing the grand pronouncements of metaphysics to be nothing more than discursive moves in the historical game of philosophy.

Stout's rejection of metaphysics in this text ultimately comes down to the point that it offers a false sense of hope in the face of ethical relativism. The proper pragmatist response to

[101] Taylor, in a response to Rorty's review of *Sources of the Self*, makes his antagonism toward such anthropocentric pragmatism clear: "Why am I not happy to make my peace with Deweyan social-democracy, plus a sense of the importance of expressive creativity? Because I'm not yet satisfied with the Deweyan constitutive goods. Worse, I'm not even sure that Dewey saw the issue that I'm trying to delineate about constitutive goods. It seems to me that every anthropocentricism pays a terrible price in impoverishment in this regard." "Reply to Commentators." (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, no. 1 [1994]: 203-213), 213.

[102] Stout provides a defense of such a historicist pragmatism in his first book, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

ethical disagreement—and, more pressingly, the incoherent discourse around ethics in modernity (what Stout diagnoses as the babel-like state of contemporary ethical discourse)—is to accept that our ethical views cannot be substantiated by recourse to any comprehensive ontological grounding. "Pragmatism holds out no metaphysical comfort," (EB 257) Stout gravely intones: "pragmatists can refuse metaphysical comfort because they adopt a Buddhist-like attitude towards incoherent desires that add nothing but disappointment to life. That is, they try to extinguish such desires" (EB 255). Taylor's "desire" for metaphysics, at least as expressed in the idiom of a theologically attuned Romantic poetics, is resistant to the kind of pragmatic *apatheia* proposed by Stout here. Again, a major feature of the antagonism between their positions is related to their conflicting ontological *pathoi*, with Stout advocating for a more austere naturalist ontology, (what he has elsewhere termed as his agreement with "Dewey's Darwinian ontology"[103]) while Taylor turns to metaphysically rich poetic languages that can better articulate his theistic commitments.

Dunn notes a potential problem for Stout's pragmatism in his characterization of metaphysics as an "incoherent desire." As quoted in the above paragraph, Stout's suggested corrective for the metaphysically inclined is not rational argument against their metaphysical perspective, but an ascetic intellectual therapy that "extinguishes" the desire for metaphysics in the first place (EB 255). Dunn suggests that this claim is ironic because "by invoking a standard for assessing the rationality of philosophical desires, Stout comes perilously close to invoking the very notion of Reason that he is, in other contexts, so anxious to disown."[104] If Stout wants to

[103] Jeffrey Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," in *Pragmatism and Naturalism: Scientific and Social Inquiry After Representationalism*, ed. Bagger Matthew (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 171.
[104] Allen Dunn, "The Temptation of Metaphysics," 304.

follow Rorty down the road of asserting that *all* philosophical approaches are nothing but historically contingent instantiations of various language games, then indicting one philosophical strand (the pejoratively labelled "metaphysical" style of philosophy) for a special kind of irrationality, appears to be proposed in bad faith.

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout continues building on his case that we need to be able to talk about ethics without feeling the need to fall back on the old language of metaphysics. As he argues in this text, metaphysical language grows out of the fear that our beliefs and practices lack objectivity; that they are merely subjective expressions that emerge from our contingent locations in history. Monotheism, according to Stout, characterizes God as the metaphysical warrant for ethical objectivity, grounding a plurality of disparate ethical ideals within a singular totality. He objects to this monotheistic narrative by virtue of its (to him) totalizing aim, where all ethical phenomena are explained according to theological dogma, and subsequently transmitted by "sanctimonious cant" (DT 85). This is the bad kind of theological discursive tradition that Stout wants to oppose to the (in Brandom's terms) "expressively progressive" tradition of democracy.

Both Stout and his theological opponents (including Taylor) would nonetheless agree that there is a plurality of excellences toward which our practices aim; they would concur that we could never achieve perfect knowledge of ethics, as there are too many unknowns in the realm of ethical action. The fact that there is a vast plurality of religions, cultures, and ethical traditions can only exacerbate this perceived complexity. One way to achieve ethical coherence within the messiness of this pluralistic reality is to posit the existence of a divine guarantor that governs over and makes coherent the diversity of our ethical ideals. Stout thinks this is the case for the

Abrahamic faiths, writing that "the monotheistic traditions unify these ideals in a single conception of divinity" (DT 267).

Stout cites Robert Adams's theistic account of moral excellence as an example of a religious perspective that is committed to a metaphysically coherent picture of ethics. In Adams's thought, Stout writes, God serves as "the actual, unchanging paradigm of excellence. The excellence of a finite thing, [Adams] concludes, is its resemblance to this paradigm" (DT 266). Stout questions Adams's account of ethics not for its theological content *per se*, but for its metaphysical structure. Stout worries that if Adams's metaphysical idea of God turns out to be questionable—if there is no actually existing Being that can serve as the paradigm of excellence—then his theological ethics will be built on a house of cards.

For Stout, a dispassionate pragmatist observer who assesses such metaphysical claims will doubt the metaphysician's requirement for a non-human fundament of ethical meaning. "Metaphysics asserts the need and then posits the divine explainer to satisfy it," Stout argues, while "pragmatism questions the need and then doubts the coherence of the explanation" (DT 268). Stout's alternative pragmatist explanation for accounting for objectivity within ethics is found within the expressive capacity of human beings to adjudicate between better and worse actions. "How do we come to grasp the concept of excellence?" Stout asks. His answer: "By participating in evaluative practices" (DT 267). Such evaluative practices involve a process of habituation into discovering how various skeins of normative terms appropriately apply to the phenomena they are meant to judge. Stout writes that "in these practices we interact with instances of excellence, and learn to apply such expressions as 'good,' 'better than,' 'eloquent,' beautiful,' and 'virtuous' in accord with the norms of our community." Social practice, and not a

metaphysical conception of God, is therefore the appropriate place to locate standards of excellence for various types of activity, but especially in ethics.

In an attempt to placate his theologically inclined readers, Stout distinguishes his pragmatist critique of *metaphysical* accounts of ethics from a pragmatist consideration of *theological* ethics, noting that "it might be objected that pragmatism, pursued as a general antimetaphysical strategy within philosophy, is inherently antitheological" (DT 256). He is therefore quick to clarify that "theological commitments need not be seen as a subset of metaphysical commitments" (DT 256). While Stout opposes the metaphysical structure of Adams's theological argument for God as the objective standard of ethical excellence, he nonetheless appreciatively cites Barth's non-metaphysical theology as an example of a theological ethics not dependent on metaphysical premises. While Adam's God serves as a rationally grounding and unifying standard for excellence, "a Barthian affirmation of God as the archetype of excellence belongs to the theological enterprise in which faith seeks understanding. It takes faith as its absolute presupposition" (DT 267). Stout here uncharacteristically lauds Barth's fideistic style of theology for its frank reliance on faith in God as the ground for its standards of excellence, not a metaphysical system that purports to "prove" the necessary existence of God for ethics.[105]

2.3 | Stout's Critique of Theology

However, elsewhere in *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout reneges on the promise that his version of pragmatism is only critical of metaphysics, and not theology. In a section entitled

[105] This assessment of Barth is in tension with Stout's earlier critical suggestion that "Barth's unwillingness to argue, his acceptance of paradox, and his insistence on the irreducibility of God's word undermine the preconditions for genuine debate with secular thought." Stout, *The Flight from Authority*, 146.

"The Higher Law as an Imaginative Projection," Stout pursues an extensive critique of metaphysically expressed theological accounts of morality by characterizing them as mere "imaginative projections" of the religionist's idealized ethics. As a self-professed follower of Ludwig Feuerbach's anthropocentric critique of theology, Stout is suspicious of all attempts to formulate moral truth in terms of theological assertion, viewing such a justificatory strategy as an inappropriate conflation of "powers" with "ideals." In an interview with Ronald Kuipers, he confirms his skeptical Feuerbachian orientation toward theology: "we Feuerbachians try to keep our views of the actual powers and our imaginative projections of the ideal from running together in a way that leaves us bowing and scraping before projections of our own making."[106] It is unclear from this statement how he might still want to praise Barth's theology, given that it inappropriately "projects" an ethical ideal onto the idealized God of Christian theology. Indeed, Stout must count himself an opponent of traditional theism writ large given such a stated position.

Stout contends that the desire to demonstrate the validity of one's particular moral stance too often finds expression in metaphysically grounded depiction of a divine call or command. The examples he provides are taken from statements made by Sophocles' character Antigone, Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King Jr. All of these individuals expressed opposition to what they viewed as unjustly decreed human laws, in contrast to a moral position they defended as warranted by divine law: Antigone opposes Creon on the grounds of the unwritten laws of the gods, Jefferson appealed to natural law in opposition to British rule of America, and King defied

[106] Jeffrey Stout and Ronald Kuipers, "Blessed Are the Organized: Solidarity, Finitude, and the Future of Pluralistic Democracy: An Interview with Jeffrey Stout, Part II," *The Other Journal* 16 (2009). http://theotherjournal.com/print.php?id=867. For Ludwig Feuerbach's anthropocentric critique of theology, see: *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot/Maryanne Evans. Mineola, NY: Dover Philosophical Classics, 2008.

segregationist policies on the basis of a Christian egalitarian ethics inspired by the theological statements of Aquinas and Augustine. Although not contesting the political or ethical warrant of the arguments made by these individuals, Stout questions the metaphysical grounding of their theological claims, finding them "hard to believe":

> The theologies of Antigone, Jefferson, and King could hardly be further apart: pagan polytheism, Enlightenment deism, and Trinitarian Christianity. When they claim that there is a law higher and better than the artificial constructions of human society, they differ drastically over the source and substance of that law. Is there anything left of the idea they had in common once the hubris and the dubious metaphysical trappings are stripped away?" (DT 241)

Stout argues that this strategy of appealing to metaphysical truth in defense of one's moral opposition to an unjust law is merely a way of rhetorically buttressing one's moral stance. On his account, the language of the higher law of the gods or God is merely a "rhetorically effective means of emphasizing that the all-too-human codes we confront in society are always likely to include moral falsehoods and conceptual deficiencies" (DT 244). Therefore, although this argumentative tactic is successful in drawing attention to the fallibility of humanly constructed laws, it is suspect from the perspective of Stout's pragmatism, which remains agnostic with respect to such metaphysical assertion.

Stout proposes to strip the "dubious metaphysical trappings" from the theological arguments of Antigone, Jefferson, and King by providing an alternative "minimalist" account of moral law. He begins by envisioning "an infinitely long list including all of the true moral sentences that human beings could possibly devise," which are then "organized into innumerable deductive systems of moral truths" (DT 242). From among this infinite number of moral

deductive systems, one would be chosen for its "best combination of simplicity and strength." Its simplicity is measured by its comprehensibility for our finite and fallible minds, and its strength is determined by the logical cohesion it attains among its inferences. Conceptualizing the moral law in this way is meant to evoke cognizance of the incompleteness of the number of moral sentences we currently hold to be true. Such a moral law, as Stout notes, must be an "imaginative projection," as such an infinitely long and logically complete set of laws could not be realized by human beings (DT 243). However, such an imaginative projection is valid from his pragmatist perspective as it does not presuppose a non-human author, such as in theistic accounts.

Stout sums up the main thrust of his alternative approach to moral law in the following passage: "On the minimalist reading, the rhetoric of the higher law is little more than an imaginative embellishment of the gap between the concepts of truth and justification, between the content of an ideal ethics and what we are currently justified in believing" (DT 245). In other words, although he believes that seeking out the truth of the matter when adjudicating between varying ethical and political claims is a worthy cause, Stout suspects that in many cases such an endeavour is blighted by discursive overreach, particularly in the rhetorical excesses of metaphysical language, which is typified here in the image of a "higher law." Hence, his alternative framing of the "minimalist" moral law sheds all reference to theologically substantive claims as it imagines what a perfectly formulated set of moral laws might look like, but recognized as a mere thought experiment, and not given the status of transcendent truth.

The problem with theologically articulated accounts of ethics, Stout thinks, is that they put faith in unknown and unknowable desiderata. He thus distinguishes between accessible and inaccessible truths, and claims that the latter kind is better left untouched by such finite creatures such as ourselves. A salient example of an inaccessible truth is found in Stout's image of a

perfected moral law, "an infinitely large set consisting of all the true moral claims but not a single falsehood or contradiction" (DT 240). Given the inhuman scale of such a set of moral truths, "most of them are inaccessible to us—and therefore not truths it would be wise for us to pursue. If the God of the philosophers exists, he believes them all, and is justified in believing them all, but nobody else could come close." So, although Stout admits that such moral perfection is possible, at least for a God whose existence is an open question, it is impossible to comprehend from a human perspective, and better left untouched. He finds that accessible truths—such as are found in the social-discursive practices that define the democratic *Sittlichkeit* he wants to defend[107]—are a healthy alternative to the sickly metaphysical discourse of theologically minded individuals whose grasping for humanly inaccessible truth "is at best a waste of time and at worst a source of seriously confused cognitive strategies" (DT 240).

Despite the fact that Stout maintains that pragmatism's quarrel "is not with the God of Amos and Dorothy Day, or even with the God of Barthian theology, but with the God of Descartes, and with the God of analytic metaphysics" (DT 268), his critique of the theologies of Antigone, Jefferson, and King seems to contradict this supposed clarification that his pragmatism remains sympathetic toward traditional theological accounts. Stout's equivocation on this point notwithstanding, I contend that his anti-metaphysical ethical theory is directly opposed to Taylor's thought on this issue, which is made especially clear in Stout's own comments on Taylor's theological arguments. Although Taylor is not a direct target of Stout's critique of metaphysics, he nevertheless does find a place for metaphysical language within his thought that

[107] Stout glosses the Hegelian term *Sittlichkeit* as the "ethical life of a people," arguing that "the norms of Sittlichkeit are implicit in the practical inferences of a people" (DT 193). He notes that Brandom, following Hegel, describes how the norms that are held in such an implicit normative framework "[evolve] in time toward their explicit articulation in a normative vocabulary suitable for critical reflection." The metaphysical vocabulary that Taylor seeks to defend, from Stout's perspective, has already been left behind in this evolution of ethical discourse.

troubles Stout's assumptions about the justifiability of religiously expressed metaphysical claims. To this end, I examine first Taylor's comments about Catholic theology made in "A Catholic Modernity?", suggesting that Stout's critique of these is unconvincing. Then, I elaborate on Taylor's strategy of finding a place for metaphysical language in the work of Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins. These figures point to an alternative paradigm of metaphysical expression that keep open the theologically descriptive possibilities of poetic symbolism, without seeking to state theological or metaphysical "truth" dogmatically.

2.4 | Taylor, Metaphysics, and Theology

William E. Connolly writes that Taylor "teaches us how all theories and interpretations are laden with metaphysical assumptions, even if and when they deny being so. His work challenges both the possibility of being post-metaphysical and the autonomy of metaphysics, for every metaphysical perspective is bound up with distinctive socio-linguistic conditions and experiences."[108] Furthermore, Connolly argues that "Taylor . . . embraces a specific metaphysical perspective" and "articulates it and defends it while refusing to pretend it has been proven."[109] This is one way in which Taylor's metaphysical thought departs from Stout's characterization of metaphysics as something that provides rational certitude for theological commitments. Taylor's fallibilistic metaphysical perspective operates instead from a perspective of openness; the goal, as Connolly characterizes it, is to "articulate" and "defend," not to prove.

A promising avenue into Taylor's metaphysical thought is through his rare attempt at explicitly theological commentary in his "A Catholic Modernity?" lecture. This work is striking

[108] William E. Connolly. "Taylor, Fullness, and Vitality," in *Interpreting Modernity: Essays on the work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Daniel M. Weinstock, Jacob T. Levy, Jocelyn Maclure (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 139.
[109] Connolly, "Taylor, Fullness, and Vitality," 139.

when viewed alongside the rest of his corpus, as it contains his most openly theological thinking, as well as some of his most critical comments directed toward "exclusive humanism." For these reasons, it provides an almost unparalleled window into Taylor's thought on issues relating to Catholicism, the relationship between Christianity and anthropocentric humanism, as well as the role of transcendence in an era where politics and ethics are unprecedentedly human-focused. Although he remains characteristically broad-minded in his comments on these social problems that are so often expressed in divisive and *Kulturkampf* terms—at the beginning of the lecture he notes how Catholics, and Christians more broadly, might benefit from their reduced stature in secular society—he is nonetheless critical of how exclusive humanism might not recognize its own shortcomings as it ascends to the level of common sense in certain contexts. It is this latter "immanent revolt" against the traditional "transcendent" paradigm of ethics that Taylor is concerned to explicate and critique (CM 26), while balanced alongside the self-critical remarks directed toward himself and his Catholic addressees.

Taylor begins this lecture by suggesting that his comments will be cast in different terms than usually given in his philosophical writings, "because of the nature of philosophical discourse . . . which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments" (CM 13). He promises instead to speak in explicitly metaphysical and theological ways, signaling that he will forgo the attempt at discursive neutrality reserved for his usual philosophical arguments, and that he will instead speak as a Catholic to his fellow Catholics. In this vein, I want to track how Taylor interweaves theological and metaphysical analysis here; in this account they appear inextricable from one another, which is a major challenge to Stout's attempt to keep them apart.

The theological stakes of this lecture are defined by Taylor according to the twin aspirations of Catholicism, "comprising both universality and wholeness; one might say universality through wholeness" (CM 14). He argues that the aims of the latter have often been sacrificed for the sake of the former, as witnessed to by Catholicism's sordid history of crusading, colonial missionizing, and inquisitorial invasions of conscience. In the drive to universal conformity that the Catholic Church has often promoted (its "great historical temptation"), Taylor finds a failure to achieve true "catholicity": "failing of catholicity because failing wholeness; unity bought at the price of suppressing something of the diversity in the humanity that God created; unity of the part masquerading as the whole. It is universality without wholeness, and so not true Catholicism" (CM 14). He correspondingly proffers an alternative theological picture of a universality *with* wholeness, in perhaps his most candid religious statement on record:

> Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness. This is the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone, that their complementarity is essential, rather than of beings who come to accept that they are ultimately identical (CM 14)

As this quote attests, Taylor finds that the high spiritual aims of Catholicism are fulfilled because, and not in spite of, the diverse range of human beings who participate in a correspondingly wide array of religious practices. Although reconciliation is the goal, it must not result in a totalizing and monolithic social vision, but instead must be expressed in as many different voices as are there to be reconciled.

With this image of a pluralist Catholicism thus sketched, such a vision of a theological "unity-across-difference" is clarified according to its resonance with Trinitarian theology: "it seems that the life of God itself, understood as trinitarian, is already a oneness of this kind. Human diversity is part of the way in which we are made in the image of God" (CM 14-15). The Christian doctrine of *imago Dei* is thus key to understanding Taylor's trinitarian commitment to pluralism, which crucially includes an account of how God's expression in multiple persons is translatable to the human experience of communication and identification across difference.

Carlos D. Colorado argues that Taylor's expressivist commitments correlate well with his defense of Catholic Trinitarianism. Colorado asserts that there is a "powerful link" between "Taylor's Trinitarian perspective and his expressivism. Just as Father, Son, and Spirit are not *things*, but are constituted by the *way* they relate to each other in love, so too human beings constituted *expressively* represent a sort of 'passing between' (between selves, between selves and nature, etc.) that reflects the Trinitarian relationality."[110] This theologically dynamic image of the Trinity, in its characterization of God as primarily relational and not as an undifferentiated unity, is representative of the theistic bent in Taylor's expressivist position. More specifically, as Colorado suggests, Taylor's Catholic commitments not only "complement" but "*help shape* (ontologically), his understanding of modern pluralism."[111] This comment helps us see how Taylor's metaphysical views might be accessed by way of assessing his theological language; the metaphysical (or ontological) upshot of Taylor's comments on transcendence in this lecture are made visible through his theological commitment to true "catholicity."

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[110] Carlos D. Colorado, "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 84.
[111] Colorado, "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self," 84.

2.5 | Stout's Review of "A Catholic Modernity?"

In his review of *A Catholic Modernity?*, Stout approves of Taylor's assertion that the triune life of God exists as an expression of the church's plurality: "The divine life remains internally differentiated even in its wholeness, and—quite rightly—so too does the life of the church over the centuries."[112] Admiring the ecumenical spirit that he finds in Taylor, Stout finds that within such a capacious ecclesiology, "Catholicism aspires to universality, not uniformity." Accordingly, Stout argues that Taylor's Catholicism represents an exemplary expression of the tradition, approving of the benevolent vision of social pluralism implied by Taylor's theology, especially as seen in his "normative ideal of sociality associated with the Trinity."[113] This echoes his own suggestion in *Democracy and Tradition* that Jewish and Christian theology might be salvageable from a secular pragmatist perspective on the same sort of analogical ground: "Assuming that the divinity is either multiple (as the plural of the Hebrew form suggests at Genesis 1:26 and as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity implies) or has an audience of angelic beings, the practice of creation might even have a *social* dimension from an orthodox point of view" (DT 268). Despite not identifying with Taylor's Catholicism, Stout manifests his ecumenical sensibility in his positive evaluation of such a theological expression of pluralism.

However, further in his review of Taylor, Stout's praise turns to criticism when he considers Taylor's conception of religious transcendence. Specifically, Stout challenges Taylor's assertion that "acknowledging the transcendent means aiming beyond life or opening yourself to a change in identity" (CM 21). Because this identification of transcendence with a good "beyond life" could be either rejected or declared meaningless by the exclusive humanists to which Taylor

[112] Stout, "Review of *A Catholic Modernity?*" 425.
[113] Ibid., 426.

hopes to respond, Stout argues that Taylor's statement violates the norms of immanent criticism, which requires that critique operate on the basis of one's opponent's terms. Stout writes that such "external critique . . . does not give humanists a reason, grounded in their own commitments, for changing their minds about transcendence."[114] Furthermore, Stout argues, "one can aim for a change in identity, and in that sense aim for transcendence of one's self, without aspiring to a metaphysical state that transcends life and without having faith in the existence of a divinity who transcends life." Stout cites in response his own intellectual heroes, Emerson and Dewey, who searched for "self-transcending religious possibilities that do not involve commitments to transcendent metaphysics." Stout's critique of Taylor's theological idea of transcendence thereby seems predicated on his own pragmatic inclination to deny the possibility of an ethics grounded on metaphysics. While Stout denies the pejorative label of "exclusive humanism" at which Taylor's criticisms are aimed, he seems to be hovering near this position in his rejection of any kind of ethical possibilities that transcend the bounds of human life.

One significant aspect of Stout's problem with Taylor's rejection of exclusive humanism is that it is predicated on "external" and not "immanent" critique. For Stout, the virtue of immanent critique is that it encourages both an adequate sympathy for an interlocutor's position, as well as sufficient suspicion of the potentially pernicious commitments entailed by that position. In *Ethics after Babel*, he asserts that immanent critique is "immanent" insofar as it "[claims] no privileged vantage point above the fray." (EB 282). Recalling the titular metaphor of this book, Stout writes that "only a tower of Babel would pretend to offer something like a God's-eye view" (EB 282). Stout's critique of Taylor's "A Catholic Modernity?" lecture seems like an extension of this comment; he appears to be arguing that religionists, such as Taylor, who

[114] Ibid., 426.

do not practice immanent critique when polemicizing about secularizing cultural trends, are suspect of building idolatrous metaphysical and theological edifices from which to look down upon secular society. For this reason, Stout pejoratively states that "we lose nothing by confining ourselves to immanent criticism except the illusions and pretensions of philosophical transcendence" (EB 282).

Stout seems to be suggesting that Taylor, in denouncing the deficiencies he sees within transcendence-denying humanism, has forgone the courtesy of proffering exclusive humanists "reasons relevant from their point of view," (DT 73) and has instead merely critiqued them as a Catholic believer. [115] I want to suggest that Stout's criticism of Taylor here is misplaced, as he has failed to consider the opening remarks with which Taylor begins his lecture. As I noted above, Taylor commences by suggesting that the theological concerns he wants to raise have been present in his philosophical work throughout the course of his career, but that because of the "nature of philosophical discourse . . . which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments," they have been presented in a philosophical, and not a strictly theological form (CM 13). In thus signaling his desire to speak in a theological mode, attentive to the specificities of his Catholic tradition, Taylor self-consciously departs from the method of public philosophizing that he normally practices.

Stout errs in criticizing Taylor for his tradition-specific denial of exclusive humanism, but more generally, in claiming that any valid critique of another's point of view must be "immanent," and may not be "external." While such a standard of "discursive decorum" (DT 84)

[115] One of Stout's major arguments for immanent critique is that it is always couched in the language of one's interlocutor, especially in settings involving multiple points of view: "Does my immanent criticism of X then show disrespect to Y and Z? No, because I can go on to show respect for them in the same way, by offering *different* reasons to them, reasons relevant *from their point of view*" (DT 73).

might be appropriate for a philosophical lecture, must it apply to a Catholic speaking to fellow Catholics? Stout's critique of Taylor at this point runs counter to his own suggestion in *Democracy and Tradition* that an undesirable side-effect of discursive secularization is the "thinning out" of ethical discourse:

> We often find ourselves wanting to persuade various others unlike ourselves to agree with our conclusions, so we adopt a thinned-out vocabulary that nearly everyone can use, regardless of their religious differences. This tends not to be a theologically inflected vocabulary, because any such vocabulary will tend to embody assumptions that some of our fellow citizens will have religious reasons to reject. And so we reason publicly from premises likely to have the greatest appeal to the greatest number. But even if we win the day, this kind of reasoning sometimes does little to make explicit the language and premises we used when first reaching the conclusion for which we wish to argue (DT 113).

In arguing for the value of honestly and transparently revealing the religious basis for one's ethical and political commitments, Stout contradicts his argument that Taylor ought not to have critiqued exclusive humanism in the language of Catholicism. As Stout writes, almost despite himself, "the theologian who realizes that it would be foolish to try to systematize the religious convictions of all citizens in a single 'public theology' need not, for that reason, retreat altogether, qua theologian, from public discourse" (DT 113). This internal contradiction within Stout's argument reveals the unfair standards to which he holds Taylor in "A Catholic Modernity?" It seems inconsistent to suggest that Taylor must engage in "immanent critique," and abandon tradition-bound language in order to adopt the guise of the protean, cosmopolitan

questioner, but then should somehow also be expected to make explicit his religious and theological commitments.

Ronald Kuipers addresses this problem with Stout's theorization of immanent critique by drawing attention to a related contradiction in his attempt to characterize democracy as a tradition. Kuipers suggests that Stout's self-consciously paradoxical definition of democracy as a sort of "anti-traditional tradition"[116] undermines itself insofar as the central democratic practice that Stout wants to uphold—the rigorous and critical questioning accompanying political deliberation—sits uneasily alongside his characterization of democracy as a moral tradition faithfully upheld by generations of citizens. If democracy were to truly foster such a radical practice of questioning, wouldn't a possibility exist whereby democracy itself could be questioned and denounced from within? Such a self-undermining social practice would then hardly be worthy of the title of a "tradition."

Kuipers argues that in his defense of democracy as a tradition, Stout is compelled to not just characterize it as one tradition among others, but as a sort of "super-tradition," ultimately revealing Stout's "liberal desire to accede to the cosmopolitan, tradition-transcending role of final arbiter of a pluralistic public sphere."[117] The contradiction here is "between Stout's appreciation of the substantive semantic potential that differing traditions make available to democratic societies, and the non-deferential, anti-authoritarian, and self-reliant attitudes which the practice of democratic questioning encourages and promotes."[118] Although Stout makes a

[116] Stout considers the paradoxical concept of a "democratic tradition" to be in alignment with American pragmatist thought: "Pragmatism is best viewed as an attempt to bring the notions of democratic deliberation and tradition together in a single philosophical vision. To put the point aphoristically and paradoxically, *pragmatism is democratic traditionalism*" (DT 13).
[117] Kuipers, "Stout's Democracy without Secularism: But is it a Tradition?" 87.
[118] Ibid., 92.

case for a kind of democratic piety that to some extent "defers" to the moral and religious sources upon which democracy depends, Kuipers's claim is that such a piety is ineffectual to the extent that it is always in danger of undermining itself precisely through the perpetual questioning that democracy itself recommends.

Stout's method of immanent criticism is often directed at his theological opponents, leading him to utilize theological premises which he does not himself endorse in the service of exposing their contradictory views; using terms inherent to their position to uncover logical conclusions that they have not themselves acknowledged. Kuipers questions the efficacy of this critical mode of dialogue by noting that a sufficient degree of intellectual difference between the interlocutors can render such a critique null: "in order to work at all, immanent criticism must affirm more than it questions." Kuipers continues: "in questioning one aspect of a traditional perspective by appealing to others, the immanent critic must affirm a significant portion of the traditional source of meaning that motivates his interlocutors' problematic stand."[119] Although Kuipers leaves it an open question as to exactly how much must be shared in order for immanent critique to work, he argues that Stout's own agnostic position renders him far enough from the theologians to cause such a breakdown in constructive criticism.

The problem for Stout's critique of theology is that he denies the substantive ontological commitments accompanying traditional theological views, and in so doing, cannot give democracy the theological validity he would like it to have. If this is this case, Kuipers asks, "how is Stout able to affirm sources of meaning that he ultimately rejects?"[120] Kuipers suggests that Stout here possibly "succumbs to an Enlightenment dilemma that Charles Taylor has

[119] Ibid., 94.
[120] Ibid., 94.

criticized in *Sources of the Self*, in which one's moral stance becomes parasitic upon the same moral sources that fund the religious orientations that one would pretend to criticize."[121] Stanley Hauerwas suggests something similar when commenting on Stout's defense of a "chastened sense of secularization" that can incorporate the theological: "but surely more needs to be said concerning why the 'sources', in Charles Taylor's sense, now seem to make strong Christian convictions unintelligible."[122] As Kuipers and Hauerwas both indicate, there is a lacuna in Stout's thought regarding Taylor's description of how our modern moral sources are fundamentally dependent upon a range of Judeo-Christian insights that have been embedded within our current discursive frameworks. Extrapolating from their brief comments, I argue that a Taylorean critique of Stout's misreading of the relationship between theology and secularity would be helpful to clarify the stakes of their debate.

It is this Taylorean critique of Stout's engagement with theology that I would like to explore in more depth. The issue for Taylor, as Kuipers notes, is the "moral sources" upon which one's moral critiques depend. As Taylor writes in his conclusion to *Sources*, "high standards need strong sources," meaning that our most idealistic moral commitments (such as Stout's democratic tradition) require sufficiently grounded ontological sources (SS 516). I want to pursue a Taylorean critique of Stout's defense of democracy on these grounds, in order to respond to Taylor's call that we ought not live "beyond our moral means" (SS 517). This can be done with reference to the Romantic expressivist resources marshalled by Taylor; a defense of the theologically-inflected poetic languages that express the cultural resonances of Judeo-

[121] Ibid., 95.

[122] Stanley Hauerwas, "Postscript: A Response to Jeff Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 221n10.

Christian belief beyond traditional doctrinal formulations. This issue, then, is just as much relevant to aesthetics as it is to ethics.

2.6 | Romantic Expressivism and Nonanthropocentrism

In *Charles Taylor's Doctrine of Strong Evaluation: Ethics and Ontology in a Scientific Age*, Michiel Meijer argues that Romantic expressivism "is the context in which Taylor's nonanthropocentrism starts to make sense."[123] He specifically locates Taylor's comment that language "makes possible the disclosure of the human world" in this regard.[124] Meijer emphasizes Taylor's opposition to anthropocentricism in terms of his Romantic conception of language, specified here as a medium that *reveals* to human beings something about their world, as opposed to the "language as instrument of control" idea of rationalist philosophies of language.

The Romantic notion of disclosive expression thus emerges as a particular way of getting at the ontological question that I am suggesting separates Taylor from Brandom and Stout. While the latter duo endorses a "non-mysterious" conception of how language and normativity constitute the human world—framed in particular by Stout in terms of the social-practical "encompassing" of natural objects, e.g., as the concept of a baseball bat encompasses the piece of wood used to hit baseballs in the context of the social practice of sport[125]—Taylor argues rather that language can only begin to approach the mysteries of being, and crucially, that

[123] Michiel Meijer, *Charles Taylor's Doctrine of Strong Evaluation: Ethics and Ontology in a Scientific Age* (London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), 137.
[124] Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, ix.
[125] Stout, "What Is It That Absolute Knowing Knows?", 178. Cf. Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, 626.

language as creative expression can better approach this task than the social-practical linguistic paradigm of Brandom and Stout.

However, the question that Meijer raises for Taylor is this: given that this Romantic idea of language so prioritizes *creative* expression, "then how to relate the element of creation and invention to those of disclosure and discovery? . . . if the disclosure of the demands the world makes *on* us depends on *our* powers of expression, then how to mark the distinction between this extrahuman reality and our human experience and articulation of it?"[126] Given the Romantic expressivist demand to go beyond the traditional mimetic formulations of art to incorporate the necessity for novel *poesis*, Meijer is right to see how this creates a difficulty for Taylor's attempt to adopt a Romantic position in his defense of nonanthropocentrism. If human artistic creations are necessary for the disclosure of the world, then the danger is that such aesthetic creations will remain beholden to the irreducibly subjective human perspectives of their creators. Stephen K. White notes alongside Meijer that expressivism "always emphasized the peculiar process of creating/discovering," but in its more recent developments, "the role of creativity is even more enhanced."[127]

With this query, Meijer exposes a potential *aporia* in Taylor's Romantic defense of nonanthropocentrism. If the ideal of "disclosure" is actualized by artistic geniuses who develop their powers of creative expression to communicate something new about the world, then are such poets merely disclosing the world to themselves, perhaps creating it in their own image? In this general problem, Meijer suggests, we find "the roots of [Taylor's] later uncertainties about

[126] Meijer, *Charles Taylor's Doctrine of Strong Evaluation*, 137.
[127] Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 61.

the ontological commitments behind our ethical views."[128] Although I will argue that such uncertainty is actually incorporated by Taylor into the main thrust of his argument—insofar as the overall thrust of argument suggests that the "ontic indefiniteness" of Romantic poetics is a feature (and not a bug) of its expressive value—the challenge posed here by Meijer signals a major hurdle that Taylor's expressivism must leap.

Because Meijer's reading is focused on the notion of "strong evaluation" in relation to Taylor's discussion of ontology, he does not deal with a significant strain in Taylor's recent writings that connects post-Romantic poetics and ontology, most significantly in the "ontological indeterminacy" that Taylor locates in the poetic output of post-Romantic authors such as Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins.[129] For Taylor, the ontological indeterminacy that accompanies post-Romantic poetry is not a drawback, but is precisely how it succeeds as an aesthetic paradigm. He thus fully embraces the *aporia* Meijer is concerned about above, building it into his account of language and ontology which is channeled through his interpretations of Celan and Hopkins.

In Taylor's writings on these figures, he tends to hold them up as poetic exemplars who articulate a path to the transcendent, but in a way that does not compel a rigidly dualistic reading of a "transcendent" realm that directly communicates to an "immanent" one. At a crucial point in *A Secular Age* Taylor asks, "how does the immanent frame remain open?" (SA 544). He finds a particularly compelling route to the opening of the immanent frame in the work of creative authors who "remain in the uncertain border zone opened by Romantic forms of art" (SS 545).

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[128] Meijer, *Charles Taylor's Doctrine of Strong Evaluation*, 137.

[129] Meijer however does agree that "ontological indeterminacy is an important concept for understanding Taylor's hesitation about ontology," and suggests that it is "remarkably consistent with his early idea that ontological questions are 'unanswerable.'" Private Correspondence. Cf. Charles Taylor, "Ontology," *Philosophy* 34 (1959): 125-41.

The inherent ambiguity of this "border zone" that lies between immanence and transcendence means that it cannot offer an assured resting place for those who seek more rigid expressions of religious or ethical doctrine. It is rather the space where an expressive interplay between the "immanent" (nature, society, emotion) and the "transcendent" (divinity, the cosmos, the sublime) can occur, mediated through the idiomatic poetic languages of Romanticism.

Commenting on the role that such (post-)Romantic authors and poets play in Taylor's narrative of secularity, Colin Jager argues that "'the literary,' in all its forms, emerges in the latter half of *A Secular Age* as a privileged window—perhaps *the privileged* window—into the inner working of the varieties of secularism."[130] Jager notes that "the new spiritualization of literature" Taylor identifies in his narrative of secularization "is an example of the expressivist turn," relating his work here to the historical movement he earlier explored in *Sources of the Self*.[131] As Jager suggests, in *A Secular Age,* Taylor re-asserts his fidelity to the "expressivist turn" by privileging the role of poetic literature in reviving traditional theological languages for the inhabitants of a secular age.

Jager is ultimately suspicious that Taylor's intent focus on the theme of the modern "spiritualization of literature" is motivated by his desire to smuggle his theistic commitments into his account of secularity. Jager warns that Taylor's "romantic critique of enlightened secularity" might thereby lapse into "a nostalgic desire for something more, some 'spirit' of poetry that will open our mundane earthly lives toward the transcendent."[132] This worry is echoed by David James Stewart's comment that "*A Secular Age* is haunted by a nostalgia for the

[130] Colin Jager, "This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor's Romanticism," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 179.
[131] Chapter 21, "The Expressivist Turn."
[132] Jager, "This Detail, This History," 183.

supernatural, transcendent of classical Christian theism."[133] Stewart further asserts that, "just below the surface of [Taylor's] description and explanation of secularity, there seems to be a sense of longing for a theological vision that has been lost, a lament for a theistic worldview that is no longer the default position, one that has become deeply contestable from the perspective of a disenchanted worldview."[134] This suspicion of Taylor's "nostalgic" return to traditional Christianity emerges as a common theme in reactions to his later, more openly religious writings; as has also been demonstrated by Stout's reception of Taylor's "A Catholic Modernity?" lecture.

In my ensuing analysis of Taylor's discussion of Celan and Hopkins, I hope to show that Taylor's fidelity in following the interpretive logic of the post-Romantic poetic paradigm of "ontological indeterminacy" forecloses any such possibility of reading him as a merely nostalgic Catholic. Instead, Taylor's work provides a tantalizing view onto the ways in which theological language might be recovered after the advent of discursive secularization. Assessing the post-Romantic poets through the lenses of Brandom's inferentialism, or Stout's anti-metaphysical pragmatism, could only result in a serious misreading—or at least a peremptory devaluation—of what such poets are trying to express. Post-Romantics like Celan and Hopkins keep the ontological horizons of modernity open to the transcendent, and in so doing, trouble Stout's claim that religion's expressive value resides only in its contribution to social-practical (read: "immanent") discursive formations. Rather, the expressive value of religion, as Taylor intimates, is visible from the perspective of Romantic and post-Romantic authors who are attuned to the

[133] David James Stewart, "'Transcendence' in *A Secular Age* and Enchanted (Un)Naturalism," In *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions*, ed. Charles W. Lowney II. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 94.
[134] Stewart, "'Transcendence in *A Secular Age* and Enchanted (Un)Naturalism," 106.

transcendent, the disclosive, and the "ontologically indeterminate" dimensions of poetic expression.

2.7 | Romantic Expressivism and Ontological Indeterminacy

Taylor's concept of "ontological indeterminacy" which he applies in his readings of the post-Romantic poetics of Celan and Hopkins challenges Stout's assumption that metaphysical expression inevitably tends toward dogmatic theological assertion. To the contrary, as Justin S. Coyle argues, the paradigm of Romantic poetics that Taylor describes demands a "loosing of poetic language from fixed metaphysical correspondence."[135] What this means for interpreters of such poetry is that there can be no assured readings that escape ontological contestability; *all* readings, on Taylor's account, can be taken in different metaphysical senses, from the most subjective and language-centric, to the most objectivist and "realist." Although one may want to settle on a preferred interpretation based on how the language resonates with one's experience, this does not guarantee a similar resonance for a fellow interpreter.

The Romantic poetic paradigm of ontological indeterminacy thus corresponds to what Taylor has called the "subtler languages" of modern aesthetic expression.[136] Such subtler languages, which arose during the Romantic period, "no longer play on an established gamut of references," whether religious, cultural, or otherwise (SS 381). Because "the Romantic poet has to articulate an original vision of the cosmos" this means that "they make us aware of something through nature for which there are as yet no adequate words." Putting the point hyperbolically,

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[135] Justin S. Coyle, "The Very Idea of Subtler Language: The Poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins in Charles Taylor and Hans Urs Von Balthasar," *Heythrop Journal - Quarterly Review of Philosophy and Theology* 57, no. 5 (2016): 820.

[136] See: Part V of *Sources of the Self*, "Subtler Languages," especially chapters 23 ("Visions of the Post-Romantic Age") and 24 ("Epiphanies of Modernism"). Taylor attributes this term of art to Earl R. Wasserman, who himself borrows it from Percy Bysshe Shelley.

although in keeping with his claim that poetic language is essentially revelatory, Taylor suggests that "the poems themselves are finding the words for us. In this 'subtler language' . . . something is defined and created as well as manifested."

There is thus a crucial interplay between the subjective ("inner") world through which the poet articulates their response to nature, and the objective cosmic or natural ordering that reveals and guides this response. For the Romantics, "the language needed to interpret the order of nature is not one we read off a publicly available gamut of correspondences; it has to take shape out of the resonances of the world within us" (SS 302). However, this does not mean for Taylor that the public systems of religious symbols fell into total disuse for either the first generation of the German Romantics from the 1790's, or their 19th and 20th-century heirs. Rather, it is that they become variously deconstructed and reassembled in the process of poetic expression. This is the dynamic that Taylor finds in the work of the Jewish poet Celan, and the Catholic convert Hopkins. Both writers sought to uncover the interplay between the "currents of nature" they found broiling within themselves, and the trajectories of history and religious tradition from which their poetic languages emerged.

The complex relationship between the subjective and the objective—no less the immanent and transcendent—is the frame through which Taylor chooses to characterize the nature of ontologically indeterminate poetry. Taylor's theory elaborates on how these binary conceptual oppositions become porous when filtered through the "subtler languages" of Romantic poetics, and subsequently, how the ontological accretions of tradition become elasticized into a form of metaphysical play through these new poetic languages. Although the older traditional languages always remain there, at least in the examples of Celan and Hopkins, the solidity of their interpretation melts in the heat of unorthodox and novel poetic language;

both in the deconstruction of poetic language itself (Celan), as well as the reinvigorated sense of divine incarnation in nature that demands neologism and other creative innovations (Hopkins).

Taylor categorizes three ontological interpretations of Romantic poetics corresponding to the phenomenon of ontological indeterminacy: (1) radically immanent and (2) moderately immanent readings, in contrast with (3) transcendent readings. The first operates as a total "subjectivism" entailing "a collapse of transcendence," where symbols operate as mere "effects of language" (CR 57). This conception of poetic disclosure denies the possibility that such language can speak to something outside of itself; the words are locked within themselves, merely self-referential. The second mode of "moderately" immanent interpretation posits that poetic description points to "something which transcends language," but this poetic referent must remain "intraworldly," such as "human nature, or the human condition" (CR 58). The third, by contrast, retains the traditional theological understanding wherein "our language strives to render God, or something which transcends humanity" (CR 57-8). Taylor's argument for the ontological indeterminacy within Celan's and Hopkin's poetics hinges on how their poetry can be read as allowing for all three of these ontological interpretations. While none of them are explicitly affirmed in their work—although for Hopkins, it is much easier to see the priority of (3) — neither are they entirely walled off.

Responding to the concern that Taylor's notion of ontological indeterminacy might inadvertently privilege the first "subjectivist" interpretive mode—insofar as such a radically open posture might lock each reader within their own preferred interpretation—Justin Coyle explains how Taylor refuses such a monological approach: "That such indeterminacy opens language to the possibility of subjectivist reduction Taylor doesn't deny—he denies that this is required. And so there's a kind of spectrum: one extreme is occupied by the zealous subjectivist,

for whom the manifestations of poetics are merely accidental . . . But the objectivist, to whom the other extreme belongs, grasps to recover the (now lost) mimetic theory of aesthetics."[137] Although Taylor does not seek to reclaim the unreflective traditional mode of interpretation represented in (3), neither does he want to submit to the "hegemony" of (1), which has gained currency in many secularized (and usually academic) circles.[138] Taylor rather emphasizes that while one or more reading might resonate for different interpreters, no one reading can unproblematically prevail over the others. His turn to the poetic exemplarity of Celan and Hopkins is motivated by the idea that these figures implicitly incorporate this insight into their work. The ontological indeterminacy implied in their poetic treatments of religious themes do not favour a particular metaphysical viewpoint, but rather skillfully move in the interstices—as Kierkegaard might have remarked of them, they "dance lightly in the service of thought."[139]

2.8 | Paul Celan

Taylor first mentions Paul Celan in *Sources of the Self*, where Celan's poetry is used to illustrate Taylor's notion of the "counter-epiphanic" work of art. Whereas an epiphanic work of art directly "brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance" (SS 419), the counter-epiphanic, "as with the *via negativa* in theology," seeks to make epiphany possible precisely through approaching it indirectly. Thus, "the counter-epiphanic can be embraced not in order to deny epiphany

[137] Coyle, "The Very Idea of Subtler Language," 821.

[138] Taylor correspondingly describes those who understand the immanent frame as *inevitably* closed to the transcendent. For those who think this way, "one reading is the obvious, the 'natural' one . . . that claim is made today most often by protagonists of the 'closed' reading, those who see immanence as admitting of no beyond. This is an effect of the hegemony of this reading, especially in intellectual and academic milieux" (SA 550).

[139] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 7.

altogether, not just in order to find a place for the human spirit to stand before the most complete emptiness, but rather to force us to the verge of epiphany" (SS 485). Taylor's description of the liminal quality of the counter-epiphanic work of art can be read as prefiguring his later description of ontological indeterminacy, wherein uncertain gestures toward the transcendent are mediated through poetic expressions of immanence.

Taylor argues that Celan negatively approaches the epiphanic through deliberately fragmenting language in his poetry. Celan's poetic deconstructions of language serve to highlight the impossibility of the poetic narrator's ability to communicate coherent meaning, for example, as displayed in "*Weggebeizt*": "Etched away from/ the ray-shot wind of your language/ the garish talk of rubbed-off experience—the hundred-/ tongued pseudo-/ poem, the noem." As Taylor writes, in this poem, "the resolute turning away from the lived, from a poetry of the self, bespeaks an extreme denuding, a stripping down of language" (SS 486). The overall effect of this specific selection from Celan, as well as in his work more generally, Taylor argues, is to deny that the epiphanic moment is directly graspable; it can only be glimpsed in the moment of negation and deprivation, which requires breaking language down into its barest components.

Taylor's most substantive engagement with Celan's poetics occurs more than two decades later, in the essay "Celan and the Recovery of Language" in *Dilemmas and Connections* (2011).[140] Here Taylor connects Celan's poetry to the strand of Romantic thought he associates with the German Romanticists of the 1790's, especially Herder and Hamann. For Taylor, "this

[140] I have already examined the "Language not Mysterious?" (chapter 3) piece from this publication, which is placed directly before the Celan essay (chapter 4). I want to suggest that the side-by-side placement of these two essays in the text is not incidental, and that there are important thematic linkages between Taylor's Romantic critique of Brandom's philosophy in the former, and his interpretation of Celan's poetry in the latter. One could think of the essay on Brandom as providing Taylor's theoretical framework for language, which he then applies to a reading of Celan's poetry.

poetics arises out of a sense of the constitutive power of language. It starts in the Hamann-Herder understanding that words don't just acquire meaning through the designation of things we already experience. On the contrary, speech, linguistic expression, makes things exist for us in a new mode, one of awareness or reflection" (CR 56). Against the "designative" approach to language, as detailed in *The Language Animal*, Taylor proposes that the "constitutive" understanding of language proposed by the Romantics can reveal the dimension of speech concerned with the human attunement to spiritual life. This is because it attends to how language can constitute or manifest certain ineffable concepts—e.g., "the 'infinite,' the 'invisible'"—that we could not otherwise be aware of.

Taylor situates the indeterminacy of Celan's poetics within the parallel indeterminacy of his biography, caught as he was—in the wake of the Shoah—between his East European Jewish community, the "spiritual tradition of Judaism," and the literary tradition of the German language (CR 62). The Holocaust broke down each of these components of Celan's identity, as it destroyed his Jewish community, weakened the pull of Judaism, and as Taylor notes, "threatened with pollution" the German language that was the gatekeeper of high cultural achievement (CR 63). All of these factors were against Celan as he sought to poetically articulate the existential situation he faced in the aftermath of such historical evil.

Describing the challenge Celan faced in doing this, Taylor writes that he was compelled to rebuild his heritage "without the most elementary building blocks. He had to recreate the materials as well as construct with them. He had to reconstitute the language in order to recover contact with destroyed or estranged traditions" (CR 64). As Taylor argues, the route by which Celan went about this was through poetry (*Dichtung*) and its "performative power to manifest

hitherto *inaccessible* reality and possibilities of being" (CR 64, emphasis mine).[141] Celan calls this the "setting free" (*freisetzen*) of language: "actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by language."[142]

Taylor finds that within Celan's "setting free" of language lies the key to the indeterminate stance Celan takes toward traditional religious thought. While Taylor confirms that "Celan stands within the space of ontological indeterminacy, inseparable from modern poetics," it is nonetheless the case that "his stance is not quite neutral; there is a longing, a straining, a yearning . . . toward the fullest ontological commitment, the 'wholly other' as God" (CR 59). For example, in Celan's image of the "Meridian"—which, as Taylor notes, "is not a place," but "a line drawn on a map, connecting places, not a real line in the world, but one linking representations of places on the map"—there lies submerged the notion that language has the power to connect us to past places and peoples, "to restore contact across the lines of fracture" (CR 65). Thus, one of Celan's poems reads, "what is it called, your land/ back of the mountain, back of the year?/ I know what it's called/ . . . it wanders everywhere, like language" (CR 66).[143] Although the poetic narrator maintains the stability of naming ("I know what it's called"), the next line highlights the itinerant nature of language; even as language names, it cannot stand still, or perfectly represent a past that is already lost to us. Celan thereby encourages a dispossessive

[141] Taylor here refuses Stout's distinction between accessible and inaccessible truth, or at least challenges it by reference to how the creative speech and thought of *Dichtung* can uncover previously unthinkable or "inaccessible" truths.
[142] This selection, translated by Taylor, is taken from Paul Celan, *Der Meridian* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1961), 17.
[143] "*Es Ist Alles Anders*," in *Die Niemandsrose*.

stance toward language: "throw it away, throw it away,/ then you'll have it again . . . on the grave, on the graves, into life."[144]

This poetic motif of hope re-emerging despite the presence of death and loss is further expressed in "*Engführung*": Ho-/ sienna./ (Therefore/ temples still stand. A/ star may still give light./ Nothing, nothing is lost. Ho-/ sanna.)" (CR 69).[145] The "setting free" within this poem, Taylor suggests, is found within "key words of the Jewish tradition; we suddenly have the power to say and hear them again" (CR 68). However, this interpretation of the poem as a recovery of tradition is unsettled by the stark presence of the repeated word "Nothing, nothing is lost," and the symbolic severing of the term of praise, "Ho-/ sanna." The bracketing of these lines further intensifies this sense that recovery, if it is possible at all, can only be accomplished in hushed, near silent tones. Thus, Taylor writes, "here is a place of radical indeterminacy" (CR 69). Instead of the description of a joyous gathering of a unified people under the awning of an unbroken tradition, there is only "the *direction toward* a gathering. What seems forever unresolved is whether we have in fact found that one exists. The indeterminacy is never eradicated. The poetry remains on its way" (CR 74).

In this brief description of Celan's poetry, we see the centrality of the notion of ontological indeterminacy in the kind of post-Romantic, theologically searching poetics that Taylor is drawn to. The expressive poetics of Celan gives voice to his relationship with his Jewish identity; the power of language to "set free" such expression is manifested in his complex poetic voice. While the metaphysical or ontological upshot of such poetic writing is not clear, there is a definitive move to keep open the possibility of receiving a theological word that can

[144] Ibid.

[145] From *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 129.

begin to map the contours of a tradition that has been irreversibly altered by the violent traumas of the 20th century. Taylor also describes the role of ontological indeterminacy in another figure, Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose context was very different from Celan's, but whose poetic innovations also sought to "set free" the power of poetic language in the midst of a disenchanting modernity.

2.9 | Gerard Manley Hopkins

In an interview with Jonathan Guilbault, Taylor praises Gerard Manley Hopkins for joining the Romantic appreciation of nature to a Christian theological perspective in a single poetic voice. Speaking as if to his fellow Christians, Taylor comments that "perhaps it's time to admit that many ways lead to God and that the Romantic ways, though they can also lead to pantheism, are valuable. I'm thinking of Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poetry I love with passion. His life and work show that there's a poetic way of being in touch with nature that's absolutely compatible with Christian faith."[146] These strong words of commendation are echoed in Taylor's usage of Hopkins in *A Secular Age*, where the latter's post-Romantic mode of poetic expression serves as a significant moment in the climax of this work. Here, poetic literature is considered as a uniquely qualified method of release from the potentially claustrophobic conditions of the immanent frame, and Taylor includes Hopkins among the artistic exemplars who found modes of expression that bring together the language of traditional theism and modern anxieties about faith, without obviously privileging either one. Hopkins' art is thereby placed by Taylor in the Romantic gallery of aesthetic works that display ontological

[146] *Avenues of Faith: Conversations with Jonathan Guilbault*, trans. Yanette Shalter (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 34.

indeterminacy; like Celan, Hopkins neither commits to nor flees the religious tradition from which his poetic vocabulary springs.

Taylor argues that with regard to the ontological indeterminacy of post-Romantic poetics, the very indefiniteness sustained in such a poetic paradigm can itself become undone. In other words, he suggests that the logic of indeterminacy is such that it can be dialectically reversed, in the direction of a recovery of some kind of stable, traditional theological meaning. "The indeterminacy is permitted," Taylor writes, "but not required. A new poetic language can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham" (SA 757). This is exemplified, for Taylor, in the writings of Hopkins, who strove to balance the demands of the new post-Romantic poetic style with an authentic statement of his Christian faith.

Taylor characterizes this balancing act in terms of Hopkins' navigation between "two modes of access": the poetic language of experience, on the one hand, and the theological language of doctrine on the other. The flow of Hopkins' poetry is such that it seeks fidelity to the lived nature of experience—the particular "thisness" or "inscape"[147] of the objects the poetic words describe, and just as fundamentally, the mood through which the encounter with such objects is mediated. Thus, Taylor writes, "the poetic images strive to articulate experience, almost one might say, to gain relief from the 'acute discomfort' of powerful but confused feeling" (SA 757). This experiential mode of access is complemented by the doctrinal, in Hopkins' striving "to make sense of, to make more experientially real, the action of God which has already been captured in a theological language honed by tradition." Although this novel attempt to poetically hold together the linguistic dimensions of experience and doctrine cannot

[147] Taylor notes that Hopkins' neologistic coining of "inscape," referring to the particularity of an object's form, is inspired by Duns Scotus' nominalist notion of "haecceitas," or "thisness" (SA 761).

always succeed—Taylor suggests that "where the fusion is less than fully successful the poem doesn't fully hold together"—the reward of Hopkins' unusual method is exceptional clarity regarding the spiritual aspect of experience, as this can become "a vibrant medium of theological insight" (SA 757-8).

Taylor argues that the poetic balancing act that Hopkins attempts—between experience and doctrine—is achieved in a number of his poems. "Windhover," for example, is particularly representative of the first "experiential" mode of access to the transcendent, as it describes the majestic flight of a falcon:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom
> of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dàwn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level ûndernéath him steady àir, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy! Then off, forth on a swing,
> As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
> Rebuffed the bog wind. My heart is in hiding
> Stirred for a bird—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Taylor emphasizes the role of "inscape" in this poem, insofar as Hopkins' words highlight the infinitely rich detail that can be discerned in the creature. And the crucial thing is that the poetic words "make manifest" or "disclose" the nature scene. Hopkins is not "asserting" something about the falcon in the Brandomian language-game sense, but rather draws upon a constellation of poetic terms, mediated through his exceptional style, in order to express his inner state having witnessed such natural beauty: "My heart is in hiding/ Stirred for a bird—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!".

The second "doctrinal" mode of access is absent from the poem, but is expressed in its dedication: "To Christ our Lord." Besides this overtly religious reference, which is echoed, in the

body of the poem, in the evocative description of glimpsing divine sovereignty in the guise of nature—"king- /dom of daylight's dauphin"[148]—there is a conspicuous absence of explicit theological language in the poem. This absence highlights the indeterminate nature of how to interpret "Windhover." Following Taylor's three-fold schema, one can see this poem either as a subjective expression of Hopkins' inner-state; as a statement on the sublime beauty of the natural world; or combined with the pious dedication, as a theopoetic articulation of the mystery of divine incarnation in nature. All three readings are permitted, Taylor might say, but none can be affirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt.

This same interpretative situation is apparent in a different way in "I wake and feel." The dour tone of this poem contrasts with the unrestrained ecstasy of "Windhover": "I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree/ Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me; Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse." The reference to "God's most deep decree," and the apparent consciousness of sin and salvation this evokes (i.e., in the "bitterness" Hopkins' feels inside himself, and how Christ's blood "brimmed the curse"), all fit comfortably within a standard religious interpretation. The irreducibly subjective framing however ("I am gall, I am heartburn") complicates the theological content, as Hopkins' inner-world and various mood-mediated dispositions lie in tension with the religious symbols. The existential angst Hopkins communicates in this work lies in tension with the salvation imagery; so again, experience and doctrine are fused together to perform the overall effect of the poetry, and their tension with each other is where the difficulty of interpretation arises. Ontological indeterminacy seems to be the

[148] The splitting of the word "king- /dom" between the first and second lines is possibly a sign of Hopkins' reticence of reading Christ too literally into the nature scene he describes. This indeterminacy is further suggested by the ambivalence of the last line of the poem: "Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion." Hopkins seems to be asking whether the violence of nature can be compatible with Christ's peaceful persona, although, this reading could be extended further, by seeing Christ's bloody sacrifice in the image of the fallen animal, gashed "gold-vermilion." One can see why Taylor posits an "ontological indeterminacy" at the heart of such complex writing.

key feature of Hopkin's post-Romantic poetics, as a linguistic expression of the complex relationship between affective subjectivity and religious tradition in modernity.

In this chapter, I have tried to bring together a number of diverse strands in the conversation I am developing between Taylor and Stout. The overall locus of their disagreement is, as I have shown, in their divergent approaches to the general topic of metaphysics and ontology. Where Taylor emphasizes the importance of affirming the ontological mystery that humans face in confronting the world—which for him finds essential expression in a variety of Romantic and theological languages—Stout seems to avoid confronting this mystery in order to provide a metaphysically austere account of "ethics as social practice." Stout's hostile approach to metaphysical language, which he shares with Brandom, is motivated by the pragmatic expressivism they both avow.

Although Stout is limited by his pragmatic approach in understanding religious expression—his social-practical account of language less than adequately describes what it means to be an expressive being in Taylor's sense—I want to further suggest that Stout has described an area of religious expression that Taylor himself has inadequately approached: the role of "religious reasons" in public discussion. Although Taylor has touched on this issue in a limited way, Stout gives a more well-rounded account of the nuances of religion's role in expressing political claims in liberal society. Taylor and Stout agree on the general conclusion that religious voices should be given a space to articulate their reasons in the public square; a position that they both defend against John Rawls' liberal political theory. However, Stout has articulated what this would look like in more detail. Although this is possibly an effect of their separate philosophical interests—Taylor's commitment to a theologically articulate Romantic expressivism points him in the direct of the *poetic*, whereas Stout's pragmatic expressivism

directs him toward consideration of the *practical*—the fact remains that attending to Stout's characterization of public religious expression can address this lacuna in Taylor's thought. This is what I will turn to in my third and final chapter.

Chapter 3 | The Expressive Value of Religion: Taylor, Stout, and Rawls's Idea of Public Reason

3.1 | Taylor's "Rawlsian Turn"?

In the final chapter of this comparative study of Taylor's and Stout's expressivist projects, I want to turn to an area of possible *rapprochement* between their otherwise divergent positions. In their writings on religion and politics, both authors have converged on a critique of John Rawls's "idea of public reason," which they argue is overly restrictive toward religious expression in the public sphere. Taylor and Stout suggest that Rawls's idea of public reason overstates the distinction between "public" and "nonpublic" forms of reasoning, and argue that a loosening of this rigid categorization would be beneficial for understanding how authentic democratic speech can derive from a wide range of substantive religious and philosophical sources. They trace the Rawlsian distinction between private and public reasoning to an Enlightenment assumption about the inherent irrationality of religion, what Taylor has labelled as one aspect of the "myth of the Enlightenment."[149] Stout correspondingly recommends the softening of "Enlightenment dichotomies" that persist in Rawls's work, particularly the public/nonpublic binary that works to unnecessarily problematize *all* types of public religious speech.[150]

While this broadly construed critique of Rawls's public reason theory is shared by Taylor and Stout, there is textual evidence to suggest that the overall significance of this analysis is rather different for both thinkers. For one, Taylor has spent relatively little time explicitly addressing Rawls's work; his total engagement with Rawls adds up to a handful of pages spread

[149] Charles Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')", 327.
[150] Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," 172.

out over his career. Stout, on the other hand, has dealt with Rawls much more extensively: approximately half of chapter 3 of *Democracy and Tradition* is dedicated to a criticism of Rawls, and more recently, he has published an essay further extending this critique; in "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism" from 2018. Stout's pragmatic expressivism evidently hinges quite crucially on its rejection of Rawlsian public reason. While Taylor no doubt contests this aspect of Rawls's work, he does not interrogate Rawlsian concepts as closely as Stout does.

This leads to the second difference in their receptions of Rawls, namely, that Taylor has seemingly less consistently resisted the influence of Rawls in his political writings. Ronald Beiner provocatively argues that Taylor has recently undertaken an unnoticed "Rawlsian turn,"[151] particularly in his co-authored book with Jocelyn Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (2011). In this text, Taylor and Maclure seek to delineate the compromises that liberal society must make with religious practitioners in order to preserve the delicate balance between secular law and the free practice of religion. Beiner suggests that, based on the arguments presented in this text, "Taylor's commitment to a style of theorizing oriented to ambitious conceptions of the good and their centrality to moral life (at least in their *political* relevance) seems to have weakened."[152] Here one can possibly sense a tension between Taylor the intrepid moral philosopher—who on a number of occasions has decried Rawlsian liberalism for its "inarticulacy" about matters of the good[153]—and Taylor the elder statesman, whose attempt to act as mediator between secularists and religionists has required him to bracket his own strong moral intuitions in favor of providing a Rawls-like theory of state neutrality.

[151] Beiner, "Taylor, Rawls, and Secularism," 87.
[152] Ibid., 88.
[153] *Sources of the Self*, 88-9; *The Malaise of Modernity*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003), 17-8.

In *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Taylor and Maclure seek to locate the most promising material in Rawls's work for formulating a theory of secularism attentive to the moral demands of pluralism. Their defense of "open secularism" is predicated, in part, on Rawls's "fact of reasonable pluralism."[154] Rawls's commitment to defending pluralism motivates his argument that a just state must be founded on a neutral stance toward all religious and secular belief systems. Taylor and Maclure correspondingly suggest that "the question of secularism must . . . be approached within the broader problematic of the state's necessary neutrality toward the multiple values, beliefs, and life plans of citizens in modern societies."[155] For them, the Rawlsian concept of an "overlapping consensus" is particularly important in articulating how a broad agreement between citizens on political matters might be formed. They write that "the crux of the matter is that citizens come together, on the basis of their own perspective, around a common set of principles that can ensure social cooperation and political stability. Peaceful coexistence will be based not on the secular equivalent of a religious doctrine but, rather, on a range of values and principles that can be the object of an overlapping consensus."[156] Taylor and Maclure thus emphasize the centrality of affirming common principles in coming to formulate the theoretical basis for a stable liberal political regime.

Despite these references to Rawls's work in Taylor's and Maclure's text, it is difficult to sustain Beiner's conclusion that Taylor has indeed undergone a "Rawlsian turn." For one, Beiner cites a co-authored work in defense of this claim, which casts doubt on whether or not Taylor is responsible for the passages in question. Beiner also omits mention of how Taylor and Maclure

[154] Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 10.
[155] Taylor and Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 11.
[156] Ibid., 15.

implicitly resist the Rawlsian paradigm of public reason with their concept of an "open" secularism, as they frame their approach around a sensitivity to minority religious identities in a way that Rawls does not. As Cécile Laborde notes, Taylor and Maclure take pains to distance themselves from Rawls's notion that ethical commitments are best framed as "comprehensive" doctrines. Because of this, she argues, "Taylor and Maclure take the ethical pluralism of the secular age more seriously than other egalitarian philosophers."[157] The problem, however, is that even if Beiner is incorrect in positing Taylor's "Rawlsian turn," it is curious that Taylor is at times quite critical of Rawls, and yet he seems content adopting Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus into his political theory. As I will go on to argue, Stout's more consistently critical approach to Rawls provides a better way of thinking about the problems that Rawls's social contract theory present in regards to the role of religion in democratic politics.

The deficiency in Taylor's and Maclure's approach, as Stout argues with regard to Rawls's political theory, is that undue focus on the value of "common principles" neglects the radically divergent starting points from which citizens come in making political arguments. Although it is possible to construct a theory that suggests what an *ideal* common-ground might look like, Stout thinks that this runs the risk of misconstruing how actual political discourse unfolds. He notes that Rawls's political philosophy "belongs to an ideal theory, a theory of the well-ordered society."[158] Stout argues that this is a dubious framework from which to approach the messy retail business of negotiating between competing viewpoints in the public sphere. From a Stoutian perspective, Taylor's and Maclure's book errs in beginning from Rawls's ideal theory of politics. As Beiner suggests, by uncritically adopting Rawls's theoretical premises in

[157] Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 63.
[158] Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," 189.

Secularism and Freedom of Conscience, Taylor "radically understates problems of philosophical coherence in Rawlsian political philosophy."[159] This is a gap in Taylor's writings on religion and politics that Stout capably fills. Although Taylor has produced a convincing criticism of Rawls in several of his writings, he reneges on this critique in his co-authored work with Maclure. Stout's response to the problems in Rawls's political theory is more carefully thought out, and consistently carried out, than that provided by Taylor.

Therefore, I claim that Stout provides a more compelling route to considering the distinctive (and potentially liberative) role that religious expression can play in dissenting from mainstream liberal sensibilities in political discussion. He is especially attentive to how religious voices, in deviating from the strictures of public reason, can produce novel forms of political speech that have the potential to effect social change. I begin this aspect of my discussion by formulating a brief summary of Rawls's idea of public reason, and then addressing the similarities between Taylor's and Stout's critiques of it. While I note the broad agreement they share in this critique—especially in their joint rejection of Rawls's Enlightenment distinction between religious and public speech—I follow how Stout goes beyond Taylor in laying out a fuller account of the inadequacies in Rawls's theory. While I have critiqued Stout's reliance on Brandom and Hegel in earlier portions of this thesis, I now outline the strengths of Stout's reading of them in relation to his critique of Rawls—as well as note how Taylor does agree with Stout regarding the value of Hegel's critique of Kant's *Moralität*. Brandom's Hegelian account of "expressive freedom" is an important factor in Stout's rejoinder to Rawls, and substantiates his argument that religious dissent in the public sphere can often serve to catalyze important

[159] Beiner, "Taylor, Rawls, and Secularism," 89. Although Beiner is mainly critical of Taylor's Rawlsian turn in this essay, he admits ignorance as to how much Maclure has influenced this. Beiner thereby notes a potential distinction between the authorial voices of "Taylor" and "Taylor/Maclure" (88).

political change. Such instances of epochal "norm-transformation" (DT 79) are better explained by Stout's dialectical account of pragmatic reasoning than by Rawls's theory of public reason. All of this provides sufficient rationale to prefer Stout's critique of Rawls, given Taylor's own inconsistent treatment of him.

3.2 | Rawls's Idea of Public Reason

Rawls's "idea of public reason" was first introduced in the 1985 publication of *Political Liberalism* and then subsequently revised in his 1997 paper "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." The idea of public reason is used by Rawls to specify the class of reasons that can be legitimately marshalled in matters of political discussion for liberal societies. Public reason is a necessarily highly limited form of reasoning that draws upon a common stock of reasons that all citizens, of any religious or philosophical persuasion, can endorse and utilize in public discussion of political issues. Although the demands of public reason only apply in the strictest sense to government officials (e.g., judges, legislators, elected officials), for Rawls, citizens will "ideally" conform their speech to the norms established by the concept of public reason "as if they were legislators."[160] Although not a matter of legal requirement for citizens as it is for public officials, Rawls argues that political discourse within liberal societies would benefit from everybody providing reasons for their policy proposals that each citizen could endorse, regardless of religious and/or philosophical commitment.

One key political value that Rawls emphasizes in relation to his idea of public reason is the "criterion of reciprocity," which holds that "citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to

[160] John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 444-5.

offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice."[161] The criterion of reciprocity is made necessary by the "fact of reasonable pluralism," in which "irreconcilable" differences inevitably arise between competing comprehensive doctrines.[162] As Stout notes, "the most important factor for [Rawls's] doctrine of public reason appears to be the criterion of reciprocity, which is what requires the basic reasons to be acceptable to all reasonable people."[163] Through this criterion, Rawls hopes to specify, in advance of actual discussion, the terms of engagement that can apply to various disputes over issues of political significance in the public square. According to his theory of public reason, reasoning about politics in public requires that one bracket one's substantive ethical, religious, and philosophical commitments, and reason solely from premises that all discussants can endorse.

Famously, in "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," Rawls retracted a number of arguments from *Political Liberalism* that appeared to restrict the introduction of religious premises into public discussion of fundamental political questions. He argued in this earlier work that although religious reasons are permissible when raised in the private sphere (the "background culture"), they become illegitimate when citizens "engage in political advocacy in the public forum."[164] Rawls revises this suggestion in "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" in a couple ways. First, he asserts that while it might be an "ideal" that citizens always cleave to public reason when justifying their preferred political policies, it should not be a requirement for them as it is *de jure* for judges, legislators, and elected officials. Rawls instead asserts that

[161] Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 446.
[162] Ibid., 445.
[163] Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," 178.
[164] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 215.

"ideally citizens are to think of themselves *as if they were legislators* and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact."[165] Second, Rawls introduces his "proviso" into the idea of public reason. This proviso states that reasons derived from one's "comprehensive doctrine" are permissible when given in the public square, insofar as they are supplemented by public reasons at a later time: "This requirement still allows us to introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support."[166] With these revisions to the idea of public reason, Rawls hopes to make it more inclusive to those who want to politically engage in the public sphere without abandoning their personal convictions, whether religious or secular.

Taylor and Stout both agree that Rawls was right to alter his original, more restrictive, position as laid out in *Political Liberalism,* and approve his more permissive conception of public reason in its revised form. However, they continue to critique the Rawlsian idea of public reason, both contending that the general framework of Rawls's political liberalism is suspect in spite of his attempts to soften the stance of public reason toward religion. Taylor and Stout believe that Rawls's dependence on the Enlightenment paradigm of seeking universally-valid forms of reasoning to correct the errors of particularist doctrine leads him to re-assert a hard distinction between religious and public reason. They feel that this continues to unjustifiably put the claims of religion in the hot-seat, when a greater degree of openness is required to fairly assess competing political claims in the public sphere.

[165] Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 444-5.
[166] Ibid., 453.

From Taylor's perspective, Rawls unjustifiably assumes that predominant Enlightenment accounts of ethics and politics—in particular the Kantian and utilitarian theories which Rawls's political philosophy draws upon—are an unproblematic starting point for deliberating about politics. Taylor suggests that Rawls seems to "reserve a special status for nonreligiously informed reason" which will be able to "legitimately satisfy any honest, unconfused thinker."[167] The irony in this assumption is that such Enlightenment theories "all have points at which they fail to convince honest and unconfused people."[168] Such a standard for *any* theory is an incredibly high bar to clear, especially given the widespread pluralism of modern societies in which reasonable people disagree about many things. This supposition is part of the general "'myth' of the Enlightenment" which imagines that, by sole appeal to the authority of reason, it is possible to generate a universally valid framework for politics.[169] For Taylor, Rawls's public reason theory is unnecessarily biased against a whole array of intellectual positions that are not formulated based on Enlightenment ideas. By not consenting to the doctrine that "reason alone" can satisfactorily produce a just politics, those who are skeptical of the Rawlsian liberal consensus are *prima facie* dismissed as unreasonable by Rawls's lights.

Stout similarly argues that Rawls's idea of public reason tries to force a theoretical consensus on fundamental matters of political justice where none might exist: "Rawls has overestimated what can be resolved in terms of the imagined common basis of justifiable principles because . . . he has drastically underestimated the range of things that socially cooperative individuals can reasonably reject" (DT 70). Beyond this concern about maintaining an unlikely overlapping consensus, Stout's major issue with Rawls's idea of public reason is that

[167] Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," 328.
[168] Ibid., 329.
[169] Ibid., 327.

"it seems so contrary to the spirit of free expression that breathes life into democratic culture" (DT 68). Although Stout acknowledges Rawls's revision of his earlier restrictive position on religion in his later writings—particularly the "proviso" which permits religionists to express religious reasons in political argument, so long as they are translated into public reasons at the level of implementation—he argues that this modification softens, but does not ameliorate, the hard-heartedness of the Rawlsian view of religion. According to Stout, the religious speech of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Abolitionists must be viewed suspiciously by Rawlsian observers, under the pretext that religiously motivated reason-giving is inherently compromised for liberal procedures of justice. Stout responds to this general viewpoint by pointing to "the speeches of King and Lincoln," both of which "represent high accomplishments in our public political culture" (DT 70). Stout argues that the oration of these figures "are paradigms of discursive excellence" because of, and not in spite of, their blending of religious tradition with political assertion. Because of this, "it is hard to credit any theory that treats their arguments as placeholders for reasons to be named later" (DT 70). Stout thus joins Taylor in opposing Rawls's unwarranted dismissal of public religious expression.

3.3 | Taylor on Rawls

In a couple of papers—"*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')" and "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism"—Taylor proposes a critique of Rawls's idea of public reason that basically aligns with Stout's position on Rawls. In the former paper, Taylor begins by questioning Mark Lilla's idea of the "Great Separation" between religion and politics in modernity; another aspect of the "'myth' of the Enlightenment" which he opposes throughout this essay: "the very idea that there is a clear distinction between political thought where theological considerations are at work, and political thought where these are banned is redolent

of a certain myth of reason."[170] The presupposition behind this conceptual dichotomy of "religion" and "politics" is that the former belongs to the private realm, while the latter is the only proper mode of engagement for public life. Taylor thinks that such stark framings of the division between religious and political life "imply that human-centred political thought is a more reliable guide to answer the questions in its domain than theories informed by political theology," which he thinks is unwarranted, at least to the extent that it is uncritically asserted as an obvious fact.[171] The unquestioned hegemony of anthropocentric political orientations is opposed by Taylor for the unfounded assumption about the inherent superiority of secular reason over religious thought that naturalizes it. "It may turn out at the end of the day that religion is founded on an illusion, and hence that what is derived from it is less credible," Taylor admits. "But," he continues, "until we actually reach that place, there is no *a priori* reason for greater suspicion being directed at it."[172]

Taylor attributes to Rawls (as well as Jürgen Habermas) such a theory of "radical separation" between religion and politics as proposed by Lilla. The major assumption shared by these thinkers is that political conclusions arrived at via religious modes of reasoning will be illegitimate by virtue of their conceptual opacity to people who do not identify with such confessional forms of thought. Taylor thus argues that Rawls and Habermas "seem to reserve a special status for nonreligiously informed reason (let's call this 'reason alone'), as though this latter were able to resolve certain moral-political issues (a) in a way which can legitimately satisfy any honest, unconfused thinker, and (b) where religiously based conclusions will always

[170] Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," 327-8. Stout also criticizes Lilla's narrative of the "Great Separation" in "The Folly of Secularism," *The Good Society* 19, no.2 (2010): 10-15.
[171] Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," 328.
[172] Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 53-4.

be dubious, and in the end only convincing to people who have already accepted the dogmas in question."[173] For religious reasoning to be justifiably excluded from public deliberation about politics, both (a) and (b) must be demonstrably valid, which Taylor thinks is not the case.

For one, Taylor argues, the argument behind (a) neglects the wide array of disagreement between reasonable people regarding various political and ethical precepts. Although certain moral and political values appear to obtain wide consensus without much dissent, such as in the idea of the inherent dignity of human beings, Taylor notes that this concept is defended in very different ways: from the utilitarian notion that alleviating human suffering is a moral imperative, to Kant's claim that humans should be treated as ends and not means, as well as the theistic idea that human beings are made *imago Dei*.[174] Although it is possible to dismiss disagreements over these issues on the basis that they do not admit of purely rational consideration, the fact remains that reasonable people continue to disagree about them. Taylor's argument is that "reason alone," or reason that is derived from a so-called universalist or humanist perspective, is not a sufficient basis for attending to key moral and political issues. Rather, from his view, a pluralistic society should always admit a wider range of both religious and nonreligious opinions into public consideration.

As Taylor suggests, a crucial moral demand within plural and secular societies (one that Rawls does not sufficiently acknowledge) is that "*all* spiritual families must be heard, including in the ongoing process of determining what the society is about (its political identity), and how it is going to realize these goals (the exact regime of rights and privileges)."[175] He thus warns

[173] Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," 328.
[174] Ibid., 329.
[175] Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 35. Emphasis mine.

against "dictating the principles from some supposedly higher authority above the fray," suggesting that this "deprives certain spiritual families of a voice in this working out."[176] Taylor argues that Rawls's idea of public (or "secular") reason is representative of such an attempt to transcend the partial perspectives of various ethical and religious viewpoints in order to "dictate principles" from some higher vantage point, glossing Rawls's argument as such: "Secular reason is a language that everyone speaks and can argue and be convinced in. Religious languages operate outside this discourse by introducing extraneous premises that only believers can accept. So let's all talk the common language."[177] Underlying this argument is an invidious "epistemic distinction" between religious and secular reason: the former though to be particularized and unfit for public consumption, the latter universal and accessible to all. Taylor suggests that, similar to Rawls, Habermas too endorses an "epistemic break between secular reason and religious thought, with the advantage on the side of the first."[178] For both Rawls and Habermas, religion's assertions in the public sphere arrive in an *a priori* unjustified manner, "hence the idea, entertained by Rawls for a time, that one can legitimately ask of a religiously and philosophically diverse democracy that everyone deliberate in a language of reason alone, leaving their religious views in the vestibule of the public sphere."[179]

Taylor wonders how such a clear demarcation between "religious" and "nonreligious" reason might be sustained, given the ways in which religious concepts are so deeply embedded within the contents of various "secular" ethics. As Laborde notes, "it is a fact seldom noticed by political theorists that religious ideas have a vestigial presence in the political culture of even

[176] Ibid., 35.
[177] Ibid., 49.
[178] Ibid., 49-50.
[179] Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," 328.

pluralistic and secularized societies: much secular language is secularized religious language."[180] Although Taylor might contest the idea that such religious conceptions are "vestigial"—in the sense that they merely retain a symbolic and not a substantive function—he agrees with Laborde that religious ideas continue to pervade our nominally secular political culture. Taylor, like Stout, cites the example of Martin Luther King Jr., whose use of distinctively religious arguments about the political issue of segregation problematizes the idea that secular reason alone offers an "ideological Esperanto": "Were Martin Luther King's secular compatriots unable to understand what he was arguing for when he put the case for equality in biblical terms? Would more people have got the point had he invoked Kant? And besides, how does one distinguish religious from secular language? Is the Golden Rule clearly a move in either one or the other?"[181] With these evocative questions, Taylor contests the notion of a secular form of reasoning that can exist without reference to the historical influence of religion, as well as straightforwardly dictate political principles to all citizens.

3.4 | Stout on Rawls

As already mentioned, while Taylor is no doubt aligned with Stout in opposing the Rawlsian approach to negotiating between religion and politics (at least in the texts I have just discussed), his criticism of Rawls is much briefer and more perfunctory than Stout's. Additionally, in *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Taylor (or Taylor/Maclure) uncritically embraces the Rawlsian approach to politics that he otherwise rejects in "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')" and "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism." While this might be because Taylor is simply less concerned with the Rawlsian opposition to religious expression

[180] Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion*, 127.
[181] Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 58.

than Stout, it is also the case that the latter provides a more theoretically fleshed-out alternative to Rawls's public reason theory. Ultimately, Stout's pragmatic expressivism gives him the resources to formulate a detailed resistance to political liberalism's suspicions of religious reasoning in a way that Taylor does not. Drawing upon aspects of Brandom's pragmatic account of language, Stout is able to paint a picture of how norms transform over time with respect to religious and political argument. In *Democracy and Tradition*, as well as in his later work, Stout defends the notion that religious expression has been transformative for our normative languages, and cannot be considered as a merely private form of reasoning. Although it is true that Taylor defends a version of this argument at certain points in his work, Stout provides a fuller articulation of it, at least in regards to his expressivist criticism of Rawls.

Stout finds that the controversy of religious expressivity within secular democracies is seen most saliently in the issue of giving religiously inspired reasons for political proposals in the public forum—the topic of chapter 3 of *Democracy and Tradition*, "Religious Reasons in Political Argument." While many of the "expressive acts" practiced by religionists such rituals, prayer, and other forms of devotion, tend to be "performed in solitude," Stout notes that "more controversial . . . is the class of acts that express religious commitments in another way, namely, by employing them as reasons when taking a public stand on political issues" (DT 63). When religious people enter into the public game of "giving and asking for reasons," particularly within political contexts where policies and laws are on the line, then this is where there is the greatest potential for conflict and misunderstanding between religionists and secularists. Despite the legal frameworks of liberal societies in which citizens are permitted freedom of religion and freedom of expression, Stout writes that "clearly, there are circumstances in which it would be imprudent or disrespectful for someone to reason solely from religious premises when defending

a political proposal" (DT 64). Imprudence and disrespect are not against the law *per se*, but Stout worries that thinkers like Rawls have come to denounce public religious argument precisely because he feels that such arguments are on the whole unfit for the kinds of civil discourse citizens must have with each other to produce rational and just political outcomes for all.

In contesting Rawls on the role of religion in political argument, Stout identifies Rawls's reliance on the tradition of Kantian liberalism that seeks to extend the vocation of political responsibility universally, such as in Rawls's invocation of a "duty of civility," proposed in his revised theory of public reason, that ought to be practiced by all citizens.[182] Rawls's theory, crucially, *only* addresses persons in their capacity as citizens who are compelled to fulfill the duty of civility, namely, by restricting themselves to supporting political policies solely on the basis of public reason. Rawls recommends that citizens operating according to the duty of civility should imagine themselves in the station of a public servant; recall his claim that "ideally citizens are to think of themselves *as if they were legislators* and ask themselves what statues, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to act."[183] Stout thus comments that, for Rawls, "citizenship is a public office."[184] He is concerned that Rawls's demands are too burdensome for citizens, particularly in regard to requiring that citizens act "as if" they were public officials, in order to be civil.

Rawls argues that citizens who recognize the duty of civility will avoid introducing their comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or secular, into political debate. Introducing such partisan perspectives to the conversation will destabilize the fragile consensus that liberal politics

[182] Rawls. "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 444.
[183] Ibid., 444-5.
[184] Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," 174.

requires, on Rawls's account. Stout argues that, in the first place, this kind of stripped-down contractual model of discourse is pragmatically unworkable: it is better to know the actual beliefs that your fellow citizens hold, even if they differ in incommensurable ways from your own. Indeed, this is an indispensable condition for the practice of immanent critique: "It is in my interest as a citizen to know what premises my fellow citizens are relying on, because otherwise I will be unable to challenge either the premises or the arguments in which they play a role. To practice immanent criticism on the commitments of one's fellow citizens, one needs to have public access to those commitments."[185] Second, Stout claims that Rawls has failed to identify the kinds of novel speech acts that have historically functioned to produce some of the most resonant critiques of injustice in democratic discourse. By only focusing on normative constraint, and not on expressive freedom, Stout thinks that Rawls has provided an undialectical account of democratic discourse.

Given the centrality of public reason for Rawls's political theory, and its significance in providing a normative account for the ways in which citizens ought to relate to one another and to the state, it is important to note that Stout does not cast doubt on the importance of public reasoning in liberal democracies as such. In fact, as I read him, Stout is providing a complementary account of public reason that can supplement, and not merely critique, Rawls's own theory. Stout suggests such an affiliation of his own work with Rawls's political theory, noting that the general thesis of *Democracy and Tradition* could be easily cast in "Rawlsian terms," formulated as a consideration of "the role of free public reason in a political culture that includes conflicting religious conceptions of the good" (DT 2). Stout thus seeks to critically

[185] Jeffrey Stout, "Comments to Six Responses to *Democracy and Tradition*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no. 4 (2005): 710.

advance, and not merely criticize, Rawls's public reason theory. It is important here to distinguish between Stout's and Taylor's adoptions of Rawls's terms, as this carries different significance in either case. The difference is that while Taylor (and Maclure) cite Rawls as an authority in *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Stout more self-consciously dialogues with Rawls's ideas in his work, allowing him to utilize the idiom of political liberalism without theoretically yielding to it.

For that reason, it is key to separate what in Rawls's idea of public reason Stout finds valuable and worthy of preservation, and what he thinks should be excised. In addressing this question, Stout looks to both the philosophical sources of Rawls's liberalism, as well as actual instances of public reasoning that offer a testing ground for Rawls's theory. For the former, Stout finds an inconsistency in Rawls's theorization of public reasoning, namely, that it relies on combining a Kantian contractarian model of public reason with a Hegelian notion of "reflective equilibrium." More specifically, while Rawls tries to follow Hegel in developing a theory that makes explicit the normative commitments of his political community, he also follows Kant in producing an abstract doctrine of public reason that answers only to ideals and not historical or cultural realities. Stout argues that Rawls' theory stands untenably "between Kant and Hegel," and his own Hegelian commitments lead him to argue for a more historical and dialectical version of Rawls's public reason theory. In doing this, Stout locates examples of religiously motivated reasoning in public speech that cast doubt on Rawls's assumptions concerning the place that religion should have in political deliberation. Noting the role of religious argument in the public speech of Abraham Lincoln, the Abolitionists, and Martin Luther King Jr., Stout rejects Rawls's equivocations in allowing the locutions of these speakers into the canons of

public reason. Stout wants to maintain the politically and pragmatically expressive value of religion, in contrast to Rawls's liberal hesitations.

3.5 | The Problem with Rawls's Social Contract Theory

Recent social contract theorists such as Rawls have often focused on the issue of religious difference in politics, as a way of testing the limits of what the social contract can bear. Rawls attempts to solve this issue of religious pluralism by arguing that that majoritarian preferences for certain forms of religion should not outweigh the interests of minority practitioners of alternative religions or non-religions. Furthermore, within the Rawlsian public reason paradigm, all citizens—regardless of the status of their religious affiliation—ought to be equally rationally persuaded by the reasons given for political policy. One issue for this last point concerns how far religiously motivated reasons can go in providing justification for various policy proposals. As Stout poses the question, according to the contractarian framing of the situation, "what moral constraints on the use of religious premises in political reasoning are implied by the common basis of reasoning affirmed in the social contract?" (DT 77). The issue here is twofold: first it is necessary to identify the precise scope for a "common basis of reasoning" that can bear the egalitarian standards proposed within Rawls's conception of the social contract, and then second, one must locate a set of specific normative constraints on speech that follow from this standard of reasonableness. What is acceptable as a public standard of reasoning will therefore necessarily determine what is allowable as an acceptable form of public speech bearing on political matters.

The quest for a neutral basis for reasoning follows from Rawls's insight that, in a pluralistic society—composed of citizens whose commitments to various "comprehensive doctrines" are not arrived at strictly rationally—the only justifiable version of reasoning can be arrived at through locating the "overlapping consensus"; that is, finding where the particular

doctrines of ideologically diverse people meet in a lowest common denominator. Rawls writes that "when political liberalism speaks of a reasonable overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines, it means that all of these doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, support a political conception of justice underwriting a constitutional democratic society whose principles, ideals, and standards satisfy the criterion of reciprocity."[186] Therefore, Rawls continues, any reasonably arrived at political consensus will be inclusive of comprehensive doctrines that endorse the liberal principles of "liberty of conscience and the freedom of religion."[187] Comprehensive doctrines that cannot support such egalitarian principles must be considered unreasonable.

With the standard of reasonableness thus specified as corresponding to the "criterion of reciprocity," which supports the liberal egalitarianism presupposed by Rawls's conception of the social contract, the question of how this standard of reasonableness ought to work in real political deliberation emerges. After all, is there not a difference between an informal gathering of citizens discussing the merits of governmental policy and a formal assembly of representatives debating, ratifying and passing that same policy? Rawls is careful to distinguish between informal and formal political cultures, both of which exchange reasons for and against policies, but with only the latter held to the stricter standards of public reason. He classifies this as a difference in relationship between (1) a constitutional democratic government and its citizens and between (2) citizens and other citizens. Specifically, Rawls claims that the idea of public reason, in its strictest form, is only applicable to judges, government officials and candidates for public office (who form what Rawls labels the "public political forum"[188]), *not* to citizens in dialogue with citizens. The public space that operates outside the purview of the public political

[186] Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 482.
[187] Ibid., 483.
[188] Ibid., 443.

forum is labeled by Rawls as the "background culture," which he notes most commonly includes institutions such as churches, universities and the media. The background culture can theoretically include any public forum where citizens are permitted to freely exchange ideas about their comprehensive doctrines to one another. Subsequently he writes: "sometimes those who appear to reject the idea of public reason actually mean to assert the need for full and open discussion in the background culture. With this political liberalism fully agrees."[189]

Here, Rawls appears allied with Stout in proposing the necessity for the free expression of ideas within the democratic discourse of citizens. Rawls's "proviso" to his idea of public reason further suggests that he wants to ensure that the ethically substantive contents of comprehensive doctrines can be introduced into even the formal level of political debate, provided they are translated into neutral language—that is, language not specific to any one comprehensive doctrine—at the point of passing the policy into law. I want to argue, following Stout, that the proviso is a product of the invidious "epistemic distinction" between religious and secular language that Taylor has also criticized.[190] It is the standard of "sufficiency" that Rawls appeals to that suggests a baseline, neutral, or even "secular" basis of speech, to which the particular idioms of various religious traditions remain inadequate.

Stout thus argues that, for Rawls's theory, "religious reasons are to contractarian reasons as IOUs are to legal tender" (DT 69). In other words, religious reasons are permissible on an *ad hoc* basis, but are easily dismissible in view of the legal language supplied by the social contract. Indeed, the reasons for forming the social contract are thought by Rawls to be reasons that no "reasonable" person could reasonably reject. Not so for the reasons of a certain religious

[189] Ibid., 444.
[190] Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," 36.

language, or in the language of any other kind of comprehensive doctrine. These religious or comprehensive languages only matter to the social contract insofar as they touch upon the overlapping features that ensure reasonable reciprocity is upheld as the central political principle within the democratic polity. However, as Stout rightly indicates, this means that religious reasons proffered in the name of political change have no legitimate purchase; at least as not until transformed according to the dictates of the proviso. They serve here merely as "private" or idiomatic forms of expression that require translation for a broader public. Although certain kinds of religious speech will indeed be incomprehensible to those outside of the circle of believers, there are examples of religiously inscribed and rhetorically powerful speeches that are not only understandable from outside these traditions, but also deeply moving. Therefore, Stout worries that the secularizing translation requirement in the proviso will excise the very content that gives paradigmatically excellent forms of religious and prophetic speech their power.

Stout cites in response several religious exemplars of "discursive excellence," figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Lincoln, whose speeches "represent high accomplishments in our public political culture" (DT 70). He includes the Abolitionists within this canon, noting how they "taught their compatriots how to use the terms 'slavery' and 'justice' as we now use them," and that as a result, "it is hard to credit any theory that treats their arguments as placeholders for reasons to be named later" (DT 70). For Stout, all of these speech-makers were exemplary for using their religious and theological heritage to provide the terminological and rhetorical basis for their arguments for political change. In the course of their appeals, they doubtlessly were expecting their listeners to be moved by the religious content of their locutions, so it remains an open question as to how pluralized a culture must be for such expectations of common theological knowledge to be rendered null. Stout concedes that the

strength of Rawls's theory of public reason is that it addresses this issue of fractured knowledge that will always accompany secularized and open societies. He nonetheless claims, however, that "Rawls is too caught up theorizing about an idealized form of reasoning" to recognize the ways in which historically contingent cultural traditions, and the religious languages that accompany them, are the *sine qua non* of democratic discourse (DT 73).

3.6 | Hegel, Brandom, and Expressive Freedom

This is the starting point for Stout's Hegelian and Brandomian rejoinder to Rawls's Kantian social contract theory. Hegel, according to Stout, was attentive to the historical and sociological origins of reasoning in a way that Kant was not. Whereas Kant's social contract theory establishes a notion of universal rationality to which all rational agents have access—the basis for their ability to contract a rational social order—Hegel's view is that reason is transformed by the dialectical process of disagreement, argument, and revision, through which the internal contradictions within ethical and political concepts are resolved. Stout thus notes that "Hegel considered Kant's preoccupation with universally valid principles epistemologically naïve" (DT 78). On Hegel's view, reasonable social arrangements, and the norms that underwrite them, are arrived at through the organic process of reasoning with others over time. As Stout writes, "the social process in which norms come to be and come to be made explicit is dialectical. It involves movement back and forth between action and reflection as well as interaction among individuals with differing points of view" (DT 78). This depiction of reasoning as fluid and dynamic thus lies at the heart of Stout's Hegelian view of public reason.

Taylor supplies a similar analysis of Hegel's critique of Kant. For Kant, rational autonomy is the basis for the social contract, as human beings are able to "will" their moral and political institutions into existence by reference to the universal laws of rationality. As Taylor

suggests, from Hegel's perspective, "the problem with Kant's criterion of rationality is that it has purchased radical autonomy at the price of emptiness."[191] Taylor explains that, for Hegel, the Kantian idea of rationality is unrooted from its basis in traditional culture. Taylor counterposes Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit* to Kant's *Moralität*: "*Sittlichkeit* refers to the moral obligations I have to an ongoing community of which I am part. These obligations are based on established norms and uses."[192] The opposite is true for *Moralität*: "Here we have an obligation to realize something which does not exist. What ought to be contrasts with what is. And connected with this, the obligation holds of me not in virtue of being part of a larger community life, but as an individual rational will." Taylor, although acting more as expositor than commentator here, appears sympathetic toward Hegel's criticism of Kant, especially in how he highlights the abstract claims of *Moralität* against the substantive moral basis of *Sittlichkeit*.

Kant's conception of *Moralität* can be appropriately read as the basis for Rawls's ideal political theory. In Rawls's idea of public reason, as in Kant's philosophy, "we have an obligation to realize something which does not exist."[193] As Rawls argues, public reason is answerable to a set of idealized standards that correspond to a hypothetical "overlapping consensus." Given that this consensus does not exist in reality, it must be postulated by the theorist as a necessary condition for conceptualizing the content of public reason. Although Taylor does not link his analysis of Hegel and Kant to Rawls *per se*, he is cognizant of how the Hegelian perspective challenges such an abstracted form of liberalism. Taylor writes that "this is the point where Hegel runs counter to the moral instinct of liberalism then and now. Between obligations which are founded on our membership of some community and those which are not

[191] Taylor, *Hegel*, 370.
[192] Ibid., 376.
[193] Ibid.

so contingent we tend to think of the latter as transcending the former, as the truly universal moral obligations."[194] Implicit in Taylor's comment is the concern that the liberal drive to universality can inhibit identification with traditional identities, which is a concern that motivates his aforementioned critique of Rawls's idea of public reason

Stout similarly recommends Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* over Kant's *Moralität*, labelling the latter as "the alienated condition in which moral reflection . . . finds itself trying to make itself completely independent of the ethical life of a people" (DT 194). He notes in *Ethics after Babel* that "Hegel's point . . . was that reason is always parasitic on tradition in this way. Pure reason is an abstraction from which no unique content can be derived. When we think we have derived something determinate, close inspection will always reveal that this content actually derives from a previously unacknowledged tradition" (EB 141-2). However, Stout departs from Taylor's analysis by emphasizing how *Sittlichkeit* should transcend its parochial bounds by making its ethical norms explicit to itself. Stout argues that a pre-critical *Sittlichkeit* "lacks the concepts—the expressive resources—required to make [its ethical commitments] explicit in the form of claims" (DT 193). Democratic *Sittlichkeit* goes beyond this situation through its progressive discursive innovations. Unlike premodern political cultures, it has "the expressive resources for making norms explicit" (DT 195). As I noted in chapter 1, Taylor is less optimistic about the resources in language for gaining ever greater "conceptual clarity" in the realm of moral, political, or philosophical discourse.[195] Taylor points out that it is not clear if our technically sophisticated languages are "really illuminating" or if they rather "distort or occlude some important aspect of reality."[196] By instead attending to the disclosive aspect of language, "we

[194] Ibid., 377.
[195] Ibid., 476.
[196] Ibid., 475.

must see all clarity, all explicit, articulate thought, as surrounded by a horizon of the unclear, implicit, inarticulate." This disagreement between Taylor and Stout thus persists in their different retrievals of Hegel. While Stout's "Brandomian-inflected Hegelianism"[197] leads him to endorse Hegel's criticisms of Kant, Taylor—while also in favor of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* against Kant's *Moralität*—hesitates at the point when this requires viewing the rational expressive powers of the modern West as an unmitigated gain.

Although I have previously recommended Taylor's Romantic view on language as a preferable alternative to the pragmatic rationalism of Brandom and Stout, here I want to muddy the waters by suggesting some benefits of the pragmatic expressivism advocated for by these latter figures. Stout, following Brandom's lead, advocates for a Hegelian notion of "expressive freedom" that conceives of language as a dialectically dynamic process. While I follow Taylor in cautioning against the overly progressivist version of this story, I also remain sympathetic to Stout's point that public religious expression can be justified by reference to a Brandomian account of language and normativity. Stout does this by showing how clear instances of advances in moral and political reasoning—particularly regarding the opposition to slavery in the speech of the Abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr.—can be explained by elaborating on Brandom's Hegelian theory of language. Stout's pragmatist account has the additional advantage of providing a better articulated rationale for opposing Rawls's public reason theory than that given by Taylor.

Brandom's conception of "expressive freedom" draws upon Hegel's idea that reasoning involves not only learning how to conform one's concepts to a given set of social norms, but also

[197] Tran, "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," 542.

requires applying these concepts to new situations, possibly altering the original meaning of the norms, or in some cases, self-consciously challenging the authority of the norms in the process. Brandom writes that "for some sets of norms . . . constraint can be balanced by the creation of a new sort of 'expressive freedom' of the individual."[198] He explains the "expressive freedom of the individual" by reference to the process of acquiring and mastering a language: "Learning the language is not just learning to use a set of stock sentences which everybody else uses too. One has not learned the language, has not acquired the capacity to engage in the social practices which are the use of the language, until one can produce *novel* sentences which the community will deem appropriate."[199] By gaining the ability to formulate genuinely new expressions that have not previously been uttered, a language user can incrementally transform the norms of their language through linguistic innovation. Because language is an inherently normative affair for Brandom, altering the pattern of usage in a language is equivalent to effecting a change in the normative relations of those who speak the language.

Stout summarizes Brandom's argument for the Hegelian notion of expressive freedom this way: "if norms are creatures of social practices, then the sorts of free expression made possible through constraint by norms will vary in accordance with the social practices under consideration and with the dialectic of normative constraint and novel performance unfolding in time" (DT 79). Because of the high degree of variability this suggests about the various uses of language in ethics and politics—given how far the dialectic has come, and in view of how far it might go—Stout argues that Rawls's programme of discursive restraint in politics is unfounded: "it is no longer clear why we need to tether our social and political theory to the search for a

[198] Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," 193.
[199] Ibid.

common basis of reasoning in principles that all 'reasonable' citizens have reason to accept" (DT 79). The crucial thing in formulating a discursive ethics, by Stout's lights, is to become self-aware about "one's dialectical location" and the "social practices one has been able to participate in and on the actual history of norm-transformation they have undergone so far." As Stout notes, "among these practices will be religious practices, which carry with them their own styles of reasoning, their own vocabularies, and their own possibilities of expressive freedom. If the thoroughly dialectical view of epistemic entitlement is correct, why expect all socially cooperative, respectful persons to have reason to accept the same set of explicitly formulated norms regardless of dialectical location?" (DT 79). Although Stout is not a relativist, he makes sure to emphasize the importance of perspective (vis-à-vis the notion of "dialectical location") when it comes to incorporating the arguments of religionists into political conversation. Stout questions Rawls's Kantian approach to public reason for its inattention to this question of perspective; specifically, to how an awareness of one's personal and social history can inform and *transform* normative vocabulary.

Therefore, exemplary instances of norm-transformation in "Abolitionist oratory, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, and King's sermons" should not be considered to be "mere IOUs" for public reason, as they are on the Rawlsian account (DT 81). Rather, from the perspective of Stout's pragmatic expressivism, "democratic discourse" is an "unfolding dialectic in which the paradigmatic instances of 'reasonableness' involve either dramatically significant innovations in the application of an entrenched normative vocabulary or especially memorable exemplifications of discursive virtue" (DT 81). Although Rawls wants to argue that King fulfills the requirements of public reason—he writes in *Political Liberalism* that King's religious statements concerning politics "fully support constitutional values and accord with public

reason"[200]—this suggestion does not undo the shortcomings of his overall position. As Stout shows, Rawls's Kantian and contractualist approach to religious expression is deficient in view of the Hegelian conception of expressive freedom that he and Brandom defend. By beginning from a contractualist paradigm of reason, Rawls tries to "tame the concepts of ethical and political discourse in the name of stabilizing the social order" (DT 81). The paradigm of expressive freedom, by contrast, seeks to balance the normative constraints one must abide by to sensibly communicate in public against the novel types of discursive performances that allow for dissent against injustice and majoritarian prejudice.

The pragmatic expressivism that Stout defends in *Democracy and Tradition* is taken up (in a re-labelled, but basically unaltered form) as "dialectical pragmatism" in his recent essay "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism." As in his earlier critique of Rawls, Stout maintains that the Rawlsian idea of public reason does not take into account how social change can necessitate parallel shifts in modes of reasoning. He argues that "a thoroughly dialectical model of public reasoning would take reasoned consensus among cooperative people on important political questions to be something that changes over time in response to various forms of experience, action, and reasoning, including forms of reasoning that challenge a prior consensus rather than arguing from it."[201] As Stout explains, this is why "pragmatists prefer the term *reasoning* over the term *reason*, because *reasoning* clearly refers to an activity, and thus to something that unfolds over time and might even change radically over time, whereas *reason* embodies at least a residual commitment to Enlightenment assumptions about reason as a faculty governed by fixed laws."[202] Stout's concern with the Enlightenment basis of Rawls's theoretical

[200] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 250, n. 39.
[201] Stout, "Public Reason and Dialectical Pragmatism," 185.
[202] Ibid.

commitments echoes Taylor's sense that Rawls is complicit in promulgating the Enlightenment myth that "reason alone" provides the key to producing a just social order.

One new feature of Stout's treatment of Rawls introduced in this essay is a meta-commentary on the unequal affordances given to theorists and citizens in Rawls's work. Stout writes that "as a grassroot democrat, I must confess that the increasingly scholastic character of Rawlsian political theory is one thing that arouses my suspicion of it. The more baroque the theory has become, the more assistance an ordinary citizen has needed from professional exegetes to understand its practical implications."[203] The irony of this, Stout muses, is that public reason is meant to serve "the public," as Rawls intends it to "instruct ordinary citizens on how they should think and behave."[204] More concerning, however, is that Rawls's theorizing itself is founded on the intuition that formulating a satisfactory "theory of justice" requires coming to a holistic "reflective equilibrium" on the balance of commitments that the theorist holds. The same leeway does not hold for the citizen following Rawlsian directives, Stout writes:

> The PRR [Public Reason Restriction] implies that citizens qua citizens are obliged to adopt as the starting point of their public reasoning a highly restricted subset of the considerations they would be entitled to take into account when deciding, as individuals, how to live well or when deciding, as theorists, what principles of justice to endorse. The process of reasoning that Rawls initially employed as a theorist thus appears to be more permissive and more holistic than the process of reasoning he came to consider obligatory for citizens.[205]

[203] Ibid., 173.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid., 186.

Stout believes on principle that the political theorist should not be afforded more expressive freedom than the citizen. Rather, although specialists in political thought will possess certain insights into politics hidden from laypersons, Stout emphasizes how all citizens in a democracy share a certain responsibility for its health and wellbeing. Therefore, in adopting "the point of view of a citizen," one necessarily "[participates] in the living moral tradition of one's people, understood as a civic nation" (DT 5). This involves "[accepting] some measure of responsibility for the condition of society and . . . for the political arrangements it makes for itself" (DT 5). Stout thus recommends viewing the process of public reasoning "as an evolving equilibrium in which theorists and citizens alike are caught up."[206] His twin notions of pragmatic expressivism and dialectical pragmatism are meant to express how this reasoning actually occurs, in the improvisational back-and-forth between citizens, in contrast to Rawls's ideal theory of public reason.

In sum, Stout's reading of Rawls goes beyond Taylor in a number of different respects. Not only because the Taylor has succumbed to the "Rawlsian temptation"[207] of beginning from ideal theory in *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, but also because Stout provides a full-throated theoretical alternative to Rawlsian "public reason" which Taylor does not. Stout's pragmatic expressivist critique of Rawls serves as one of his most distinctive contributions to the topic of religious expression in secular society. Through it, he delivers a convincing account of how Rawls's conception of public reason—with its intent on conforming public discourse around a narrow model of reason-giving—might be faulty. Taylor also argues against Rawls's idea of

[206] Ibid., 188.
[207] Beiner, "Taylor, Rawls, and Secularism," 89.

public reason, citing concerns similar to Stout's, but he neglects to follow through on this critique in parts of his own political theory.

Conclusion

My engagement with Taylor's and Stout's work in this thesis has ranged across a spectrum of topics related to their various treatments of expressivism. I began by considering how Taylor's Romantic philosophy of language challenges Brandom's and Stout's pragmatic view of language (chapter 1). I sided with Taylor in emphasizing the importance of foregrounding the role of "disclosure" in language, instead of merely assertion. I then related this conflict between Romantic and pragmatic expressivism to the disagreement between Taylor and Stout on how to approach the question of metaphysics and theology in religious thought (chapter 2). I rejected Stout's negative treatment of metaphysics and theology, particularly in regards to his critique of Taylor's work in these areas. I instead recommended following Taylor's paradigm of "ontological indeterminacy"—specifically as expressed in the post-Romantic poetry of Paul Celan and Gerard Manley Hopkins— which resists univocal readings of ontological and metaphysical language. Finally, I examined the political aspects of Taylor's and Stout's work that pertains to the issue of religious expression in secular society (chapter 3). Stout's pragmatic expressivist project was considered in a favorable light in this chapter, as he challenges Rawls's public reason theory more satisfactorily than Taylor.

While this thesis is not meant to be an exhaustive comparison of Taylor and Stout, I hope it can serve as an early foray into trying to understand and reconcile their separate bodies of work. This is the first study (that I am aware of) which has attempted this side-by-side evaluation of both authors. My analysis of their respective positions was somewhat constrained by the fact that there is relatively little overlap between them in secondary literature. Although a few authors have suggested connections between them, this is usually done in passing, and without much detail. This lacuna in the scholarship on both Taylor and Stout is compounded by reality that

neither of them has publicly said much about the other—Taylor in fact has not referenced Stout at all in his writings, while Stout, outside of his review of *A Catholic Modernity?*, has only cited Taylor on a few occasions.[208]

A further difficulty was that Taylor and Stout are both in the process of completing books that I have only been able to partially glimpse. While it is doubtful that either Taylor's forthcoming book on Romantic poetics or Stout's book on the "political history of religion"[209] will significantly alter the trajectories of their projects (at least based on what I have been able to see), they are nonetheless continuing to work through issues that do not admit easy answers, and as such, they continue to experiment with new formulations for old problems. Because of this, this thesis should be considered as a snapshot in time of two thinkers who are continuing to practice the work of thought, which in principle is never-ending.[210] Regardless, it is clear that they have both staked out rather definitive positions which they consistently defend throughout their writings.

This is why I have organized my comparative study of them around the labels of Romanticism and pragmatism. These are broad orientations that both philosophers have respectively subscribed to over the course of their careers, providing methodological anchor points for much of their work. The further fact that each figure defends a form of what they call "expressivism" signals a possible overlap in their thought. Although I have located something

[208] Stout cites Taylor in *Ethics after Babel* (71), as well as more recently in "Dialogical Democracy: King, Michnik, and the American Culture Wars," in *The Long 1989: Decades of Global Revolution*, ed. Piotr H. Kosicki and Kyrill Kunakhovich (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2019), 115.
[209] The working title of the book as of March 2020.
[210] Taylor refers to the practice of philosophy as a "perpetual disturbance of the peace" in his essay on Brandom. Taylor, "Language not Mysterious?" 41.

resembling a *rapprochement* between them in their critical work on Rawls, it is clear that otherwise, their expressivist projects are directed toward rather different aims.

The divergence between their expressivisms, as I have been characterizing it, is in regards to a series of "big" questions about metaphysics and theology, the human relationship to the world, and the mediational role of language in all this. While Taylor and Stout often seek conciliation instead of conflict, they are nonetheless committed to providing substantive philosophical answers to these questions, and as such, defend their preferred positions against possible detractors. Additionally, the former's commitment to Catholicism and the latter's agnostic outlook is another possible source of their divergent theoretical approaches. Their philosophical differences in large part correspond to competing religious conceptions of the world.

One example of this difference in religious outlook can be found in their separate reactions to a figure such as Emerson, who is especially interesting in the context of my thesis topic given that he straddles the boundary between Romantic and pragmatic thought. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor praises Hopkins's fidelity to Christian orthodoxy in contrast to Emerson's "slide towards a religion of impersonal order" (SA 764). Taylor's Catholicism probably explains his aversion to Emerson's deism, as he clearly prefers Hopkins's theistic expression of Romanticism. Stout, by contrast, valorizes Emerson's conception of piety for being more compatible with the social practice of democracy than that seen in orthodox Christianity (typified by Stout in the "Augustinian" notion of piety). Stout argues that Emersonian perfectionism rejects the "fixed telos of perfection toward which earlier perfectionisms directed their ethical striving," thus allowing for a more flexible and improvisational notion of virtuous conduct (DT 29). From Stout's perspective, every iteration of theistic orthodoxy runs the risk of stagnation

and decay. Against Taylor, he endorses Emerson's ideal individual, who "would rather quit the church than grant that some holder of church of church office or even a democratically organized congregation has the authority to administer the distinctions between saved and damned, saint and sinner, true and false prophet, scripture and apocrypha" (DT 20). "Christian orthodoxy," Stout warns alongside Emerson, can burden "the forward movement of spirit."[211]

In Stout's review of *A Catholic Modernity?*, he cites Emerson's humanist approach to the transformation of the self in response to Taylor's theistic claims:

> One can aim for a change in identity, and in that sense aim for transcendence of one's self, without aspiring to a metaphysical state that transcends life and without having faith in the existence of a divinity who transcends life. The possibility of self-transcendence would seem to be sufficient to avoid the stifling of the human spirit. Indeed, it appears that there are many self-transcending religious possibilities that do not involve commitments to transcendent metaphysics.[212]

Stout's Emersonian suspicion of Taylor's Catholic understanding of religious transcendence is motivated by the idea that the weight of theological tradition unnecessarily burdens believers. The better option is to chart one's own theological path, in search of a more authentic expression of one's spirituality. This is indeed one aspect of the general Romantic aversion to submissive engagement with traditional religion, as followers of the Romantic path tend to seek out non-standard and idiosyncratic expressions of spiritual life.

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[211] Jeffrey Stout, "The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power: A Reading of Emerson's 'Experience'," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 35, no.1, (2014): 14.
[212] Stout, "Review of *A Catholic Modernity?*", 426-7.

By turning to Taylor's attempt to combine aspects of traditional theology with Romantic expressivism, I hope to have demonstrated that one need not take up the full Emersonian project of self-realization in order to escape religious inauthenticity. My claim is that Taylor's version of orthodoxy is less limiting than how Stout has characterized it, despite Taylor's unwillingness to follow Emerson's rejection of traditional Christianity. Taylor escapes the main thrust of Stout's critique of "A Catholic Modernity?" by virtue of the Romantic expressivist resonances of his theology, most saliently seen in his concept of "ontological indeterminacy." According to Taylor, poetic expression which follows the logic of ontological indeterminacy neither fully rejects orthodoxy, but also resists straightforwardly asserting it. Rather, the line between immanence and transcendence blurs in the searching and uncertain language of post-Romantic poetics. Theistic orthodoxy is thereby "disclosed," in Taylor's Heideggerian sense, instead of "asserted," as per Brandom's language game theory.

A major weakness of Stout's approach to religious expression, as I've been tracing it, is that it is too focused on the game of assertion and counter-assertion described by Brandom, and misses out on the dimension of language that engages with spiritual mystery. Stout follows Emerson in worrying that "Romantic consolation" can become "overly successful in its tranquilizing effects,"[213] which is why he recommends limiting religious discourse to the rational discourse of immanent critique. Taylor's portrayal of the dynamism of Romantic poetic expression illuminates a less soporific version of this aesthetic tradition. Taylor is not a Romantic in the sense of merely wanting to console wounded souls with saccharine words (recall Brandom's worry about the Romantic emphasis on "feeling" and "enthusiasm"[214]). Rather, his

[213] Stout, "The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power," 11.
[214] Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, 92-3.

Romanticism seeks out the revitalizing effects of poetic expression that engages with the ontologies of religious traditions made uncertain in modernity. Poetic expression exposes the protean nature of language, and in turn, reveals that our ontological questions about the world are similarly in flux. Unorthodox approaches to theological expression, as practiced by post-Romantic poets like Hopkins and Celan, reveal the ambiguity of the interplay between language, religious tradition, and subjective feeling.

However, in saying this, I have also explored the advantage of Stout's methodology in a political analysis of transformative public religious expression. Stout gives a better account than Taylor of public reasoning as it relates to religion, and more consistently challenges Rawls on this score. It appears that Taylor, unable to connect his Romantic expressivism to his political sense of the expressive value of religion, has tended to either provide a limited critique of Rawls's public reason, and at other times seems content to merely cite Rawls as an authoritative philosophical source. In this political register, Stout's pragmatic expressivism seems more applicable and desirable than Taylor's Romantic expressivism.

In the end, Taylor and Stout are both interested in defending their own particular conceptions of the expressive value of religion. Taylor follows this through most explicitly in his defense of theologically-inflected Romantic poetics, while Stout highlights the rational aspects of religious language underappreciated by Enlightenment-inspired commentators such as Rawls. I hope to have made clear some strengths and weaknesses in both methods. Taylor's approach is sensitized to the affective dimensions of religious language, especially in relation to how ontological and metaphysical claims are made about the world. He argues that attending to the work of poetic exemplars like Celan and Hopkins can illuminate the mysterious workings of language. The theopoetic expressions of these poets work to disclose the affinity between

subjective perception and desire, on the one hand, and the ontological claims of traditional religion on the other. I argue that Taylor's Romantic expressivist account goes beyond Stout in articulating the complexities of theological and metaphysical language—religious language is not reducible to mere pragmatics, as Stout seems to assert. Additionally, Taylor's attunement to the pitfalls of anthropocentric ontology—which he voices from his Romantic perspective—challenges Stout's assumption that a naturalist ontology is the best starting point for deliberation about religious questions. Stout, for his part—while neglecting the disclosive dimension of language articulated by Taylor—brings out the conceptual dynamics of religious expression in an important way. His pragmatist project, following Brandom's lead, centers the importance of "expressive freedom" for religious citizens as they make arguments in the public sphere. While Taylor is also invested in advocating for the expressive freedom of religionists in a secular age, he addresses this problem primarily through the lenses of his Romantic and post-Romantic sources. Between the approaches of Romantic and pragmatic expressivism, we can see the opposing pulls of two distinctive stances on religious expression: Taylor's, which favors the poetic, and Stout's, the practical.

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