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PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION IN SECULAR SOCIETY

by

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Abstract:

Charles Taylor writes that identity emerges from the reflection upon, and articulation of one's lived experience. This account of identity precludes psychology from taking a natural science approach to the study of 'identity', or 'the self'. With the emergence of psychology within secular society, the relation between psychology and religion is examined here. This examination clarifies the role of psychology as an authority on identity. This thesis proposes that the role of psychology is to promote articulacy about the ideal of authenticity. In this way, psychology can address problems arising from individualism in modernity, and can serve as an authority on identity, complementing the other possible authorities on identity present in secular society, including religion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Psychology is an uncomfortable discipline, in the midst of a kind of disciplinary identity crisis. Large segments of the discipline strive to model psychology after the natural sciences, yet even among these, in contrast with the natural sciences, there are no foundational tenets or general laws. Coming up with a central idea of what psychology is, that most psychologists could agree on, seems to be impossible. This thesis explores the tendency among some psychologists to claim ‘identity’ or ‘the self’ as their domain of study. Many areas of psychology do not claim to have anything to do with these, including neuropsychology and many forms of experimental psychology. These areas of psychology may even form the majority of the discipline, but a significant part of the discipline seeks to be a scientific authority on identity or ‘the self’. It is these, which include the large part of social psychology and humanistic psychology, and which figure significantly the popular understanding of ‘psychology’, to which this thesis is addressed.

Modern, secular society offers a wide variety of directions to which we can turn to learn about ourselves, so although psychology is to be a science of ‘personhood’, it is not the only authority available. Others range from the arts, to popular culture, to life-coaches, and many forms of spirituality including religion. The focus of the present paper is to examine this relation between psychology and religion in secular society in order to come to some understanding of the crisis psychology finds itself in. Psychology has emerged with the development of a

secular modernity, yet this development has not eliminated or replaced religion. Psychologists have developed accounts of what it means to be a person even while the preacher in the church across the street gives a religious account of personhood. As a product of a secular modernity, psychology claims the authority afforded by scientific status in order to bolster its account, while religion maintains its claim to divine authority. Where psychology is beset by problems that derive from using science to explain human experience (such as reductionism and abstraction), religion has always been an authority on the meaning of human experience. Thus, psychology finds itself in the position where its project is not clearly defined, even to psychologists themselves, and where religion is unequivocally equipped to answer questions of personhood and identity. An examination of the relation between the two construals of human experience offered by psychology and religion will shed light on the role of psychology as an authority on 'identity' or 'the self', which is obscured by the debate around its scientific status.

Charles Taylor writes, in *A Secular Age*, that the secular context in which both psychology and religion function, opens up a very different experience of life than was possible in previous societies. Out of the relatively recent distinction between 'the divine' and the 'human' emerged the possibility of understanding the human domain itself, without a foundation in the divine. This distinction cleared a space for all the sciences and for their respect and mobilization of the power of human reason. Psychology as a science also emerged from the development of secularity, yet is caught in the awkward

position of dealing with issues of identity and lived experience using cold rationality. Does psychology stand in the corner of 'reason', facing off with religion in the corner of 'faith'? I will argue that psychology and contemporary forms of religion are not necessarily opposed because they both express the same emphasis on individuality that is characteristic of modernity. Psychology and religion both operate in the same general domain of making sense of individual human experience, but appeal to different sources of authority and employ different approaches. If Taylor is correct that secular society allows for a variety of construals of experience (and we experience this in our everyday interactions with people of various religions and lifestyles), then perhaps psychology and religion need not conflict. However, forging a complementary understanding of each other is impossible so long as psychology is unable to articulate its own project.

What does psychology do? What does it study? If we asked these questions of any of the other natural sciences, they could be given answers that reflect a general unity within the discipline. On the other hand, psychology is a fragmented discipline. Without being able to articulate its own project as a discipline, psychology ends up aping the natural sciences, hoping that their explanatory and predictive power will do the work of elucidating its project. Psychology subverts its own position of authority on experience by submitting it to the rigours of methodology, and abstracting it into lifeless but operationalizable concepts. Psychology's inarticulate denial of its own project cripples and

fractures the discipline. Psychology fails at being scientifically rigorous or at being relevant to real-life.

Taylor writes that personhood develops through self-reflection on the meaning of experience. When psychology addresses identity or selfhood, it must take in account their foundation in the human motivation towards *meaning* – a motivation that is expressed, both historically and in secular society, in religion. Taylor describes religion as a set of practices and beliefs that structure the world according to the meaning it derives from a divine foundation. This working definition will serve the purposes of this thesis because its distinction between the transcendent and the immanent is specific to the forms of religion present in our modern, secular society. Yet this definition would be a poor fit for many forms of religion found in various other societies or historical periods where there was no such transcendent/immanent distinction, and where God (and/or other agencies) was directly involved with the world. Where the natural world, in its order and its great events, was seen as issuing from acts of God, and social structures were founded directly on a hierarchy culminating in the power of God, religion (in a broad sense) was encountered in every experience of meaning or significance in life. The emergence of secularity was not an attack on this close relation between religion and the meaning of life, but was an attempt to carve out an ‘exclusively human’ domain, where human reason could function independently of ‘divine’ underpinnings. The relation between religion and the motivation towards meaning in life has a long history. Secularity is a world in which people live, and seek meaning, in the space left behind after the divine domain of God was

distinguished from the human world. As in previous societies, religion can still support this motivation, yet in the specific form that follows from the transcendent/immanent distinction, religion has come to refer to a specific way of expressing this motivation, with reference to the divine. This has not stifled religion, but has opened up the possibility of new, 'secular', ways of expressing its same motivation towards meaning; in humanism, various new age spiritualities, and, as will be argued later, psychology.

Psychology tends to miss the importance of lived experience in the world and in society in its pursuit of scientific status and treats identity as an atomic and isolable property, or collection of properties, of an individual, rather than the outcome of a life oriented towards meaning. Moreover, in its inarticulacy about identity and its own project, psychology derives from and propogates a superficial version of individualism that manifests in what Taylor calls the 'malaise of modernity'. The breakdown of family and other social structures, the dominance of instrumental reason over the senses of passion, compassion and wonder that are central to meaningful experience, and the lack of political participation that reflects a wider problem that people are decreasingly concerned with issues larger than themselves, all demonstrate this superficial individualism.

What hope is there for psychology as a discipline? For a start, despite psychology's inarticulacy about what it means to experience life as an individual, as evidence by its inadequate accounts of identity and selfhood, individuality is not necessarily a shallow way of life. Despite the above-mentioned problems

with a shallow version of individualism, it also has an upside - in the possibility of increased personal agency and self-reflection. Taylor writes that individuality, despite the superficial forms it often takes, is grounded in a powerful moral ideal: that of *authenticity*. If psychology is to be an authority on identity or selfhood, it must recognize the religious motive towards meaning that grounds these, and the ideal of authenticity that structures the expression of motivation in modern life. This paper concludes with an outline of how authenticity functions as a moral ideal in modern, secular society.

2. SECULAR SOCIETY

A. *On the relation of psychology and religion in secular society*

In some ways, psychology and religion seem to compete to provide answers to similar questions. Questions such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘How should I live?’, and ‘What is a person?’ are found in various forms in both psychology and religion. Psychology approaches these with a focus on ‘identity’ and much of its work in this area has to do with self-knowledge and self-appraisal; examples include studies in ‘self-concept’, ‘self-esteem’ and the like. Much of the practical work of psychology in therapeutic contexts is based on various articulations of these theories of ‘self’, developed out of humanistic theories such as Abraham Maslow’s, with its notion of ‘self-actualization’, and Carl Rogers’ ‘person centred therapy’ (Vitz, 1979). Roy Baumeister (1987) writes in his article ‘How the Self Became a Problem’ of the development of the ‘self’ as a psychological category. He notes that the general understanding of individuals having a ‘self’ is a relatively recent historical development, and that psychology both relies on and perpetuates this notion. Previously, people understood themselves and their experience of life in religious terms. Religion answers these questions of personhood by offering an account of the world, grounded in the divine, by which a person could make sense of their own experience as having a certain place and significance within social, natural and divine contexts. One finds oneself within the given ontology, as a ‘sinner’, a ‘child of God’, or in one of many other specific articulations of the divine order.

Both psychology and religion give an account by which a person can understand experience, as well as giving a supporting orientation to life. According to psychology, one *should* be directed towards an integrated identity, an actualized self, high self-esteem, or high efficacy.¹ According to religion, we should live according to a moral code, and move from 'sin' to 'salvation'. Furthermore, both psychology and religion share some similar functions. As a reflection of the moral aspect of both psychology and religion, both offer 'expert' help. One goes to 'see a psychologist' when one has an identity crisis, or when one experiences some kind of breakdown of everyday life – in relationships, careers etc, and this breakdown is attributed (by oneself or someone else) to one's psychological 'self'. Others will seek the counsel of clergy, often in the practice of confession, or under the name of 'pastoral counseling', in very similar circumstances: the breakdown of everyday forms of life such as relationships or careers.

Psychology and religion share these superficial features, yet stand in an unclear relation to each other, neither as full allies nor as full competitors. On one hand, psychology is generally hostile to religion, with its long history of explaining religion and religious phenomena in its own terms. From Freud's assessment of religion as an 'illusion' to contemporary studies that give religion the backhanded compliment that it affords this or that psychological benefit,

¹ Psychological theories of the self set up the 'self' as an ideal to which our lives should be oriented. Included in a theory of self is the demonstration that few or none of us fully realize our 'selves' This 'imperfect' state has been variously described as neurosis, disintegration, low self-esteem, distorted self-concept etc.

psychology has tended to explain religion according to the standard of the psychological theories in vogue. On the other hand, religion has taken various stances towards psychology. Sometimes endorsed as a supplement to religious practice, sometimes dismissed as a 'worldly' (and therefore sinful) pursuit, and often (inadvertently) absorbed, piecemeal, into its own doctrine, psychology is relevant to religion (whether or not this relevance is articulated).

Any examination of this complicated relationship must take into account the historical context in which it occurs. The emergence of psychology has some correspondence with the emergence of secular society, a context that is unavoidably significant for religion. The first chapter of this paper examines the unique conditions of the secular context, as described by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*, in which psychology and religion stand in ambiguous relation to each other. Is psychology a replacement for religion? Is religion still relevant? Must we establish distinct scopes of influence for religion and psychology within secular society? There are those who would take each of these positions, yet before endorsing any one of them in this paper, it is necessary to examine the structure of secular society, which has supported the development of psychology, and lends itself to questions of this kind. In short, psychology and religion both deal with *meaning* in life and offer different accounts of it, which are sometimes compatible and sometimes incompatible. How do psychology and religion stand in relation to each other in secular society? How do people experience and understand meaning in life, given that these provide two very different accounts of it?

B. *What is 'secularity'?*

Charles Taylor begins his book *A Secular Age* with the observation that while we all admit to living in a secular age, and that this has something to do with the status of religion, we rarely agree on or even articulate what it is that 'secularity' means. He submits the most common theories of what secular society consists in.

The first describes the retreat of religion from the public sphere. Taylor shows that one can fully participate in many aspects of public life without ever 'encountering God' (Taylor, 2007, p. 1). Political, legal, economic, educational and other spheres of public activity function entirely without reference to God or recourse to a divine foundation. This use of the word 'secular' puts contemporary public life in contrast with previous historical periods, where these same spheres of public life were inseparable from their embedding in religious life. The second describes the wane of religious practice in many of the milieux that make up society. Simply, fewer people profess belief in God and regularly engage in religious practice. Church attendance has dwindled, and religious belief is becoming less common than un-belief. Taylor describes both of these broad theories of secularity as 'subtraction theories', where the waning of religion is viewed with "either nostalgia or relief" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2) as something that is passing away. According to these theories, society is 'moving on' from religion, and a meaningful life in secular society does not require religion.

Taylor is not satisfied with these subtraction theories because while they may be descriptive of certain aspects of secular society, they do not enrich our understanding of our daily experience of 'secularity'. They do not tell us why, for example, religion is still compelling and relevant for many people and communities within secular society. These theories do not explain the persistence of religion as a viable mode by which many people experience and understand meaning in life. Taylor moves to address this kind of question by approaching secular society as a context in which some people hold religious beliefs and some do not. By examining the experience of believers, and of unbelievers in secular society, Taylor seeks to develop an account that both goes beyond and supports the first two theories. Thus, secular society is the context in which people work out the 'moral/spiritual shape' of their lives.² Where previous societies only supported religious articulations of meaning in life, secular society is one that supports many possibilities for meaning. Taylor's project is to investigate the *conditions* of belief in secular society, such that it is possible to articulate meaning in any number of ways.

Taylor's account is valuable for the present work because of its starting point in the lived experience of people living in secular society. It is in this experience that the topic of this work is relevant. Namely, the relationship

² For Taylor, meaning derives from the 'moral/spiritual shape' of one's life, because it is according to this 'shape' (which he often calls a moral 'background') that certain things in life are more significant than others, i.e., family and honour are more significant and meaningful than ice cream flavors. Secular society is one in which there are many possible ways to articulate 'meaning'.

between psychology and religion is important for those who struggle with the questions of meaning and personhood to which psychology and religion give a variety of answers. These questions are extremely pressing because they tend to arise when one's life has 'gone off the rails', and one often suffers through their contemplation. The presence of the variety of ideologies offered in secular society only increases the anxiety with which one deals with these questions, and compels one to 'get them *right*'. In other words, a person cares about questions regarding the relation between psychology and religion if something in their own experience is at stake. For example, if a religious believer suffers from depression, it can be a real struggle to choose between seeing a religious or a psychological counselor. Thus, if secular society is the context in which psychology and religion stand in an unclear relation, an examination of this relation must begin at the place where it is relevant: in the lived experience of belief and unbelief in secular society.

B. *Conditions of belief*

i. Recognition of Possibilities

Taylor notes that we live in a society where a religious believer can look around and see happy, intelligent and 'good' people who profess different faiths, or who claim no religious affiliation. Likewise, an unbeliever can have daily interactions with someone who holds religious beliefs that the unbeliever himself dismisses. This experience reflects a major condition for belief in secular society; that while one can hold a specific system of belief, one also recognizes the

viability of other ways of living. This was not the case in previous societies, where a religious believer could not ‘step outside’ his religious view of life. It was taken for granted that everyone believed in God, and that those who did not were ‘sinners’ or ‘pagans’. Secular society confronts believers and unbelievers with a multitude of individuals and communities who establish meaningful lives based on a wide range of formal religions and other systems of understanding.

Recognizing that a system of belief is one among other possibilities leads to reflection upon that system of belief against an “index of doubt” (Taylor, 2007, p. 11). Belief is now established against the possibility of ‘being wrong’, rather than consisting of naïve acceptance of a certain view of reality. That is, where people previously took religious answers to the ultimate questions in life for granted, they no longer do so. It is possible, in secular society, to live according to any number of answers to questions of meaning in life, and as one recognizes this, one no longer takes these answers for granted. Religious beliefs themselves can only be examined where other possibilities for living are present. That is, where religious society allowed for reflection on specific beliefs and doctrines, this reflection took place within the context of a naïve acceptance of a basic religious worldview. In contrast, secular society supports reflection upon a religious worldview itself, as there are other perspectives from which to examine it. The unique characteristic of secular society is that it opens up the possibility that there can be *other* ways of making sense of life. These other ways could be other religions, or, for the first time, “exclusively human” (Taylor, 2007, p. 19) moral options that do not refer to the divine.

ii. Sources of ‘fullness’

We all have a sense of what a ‘good life’ is; that in some condition, place, or form, life has a certain *fullness* to which we aspire. Historically, only religious terms expressed this sense of fullness: in an afterlife, or of achieving enlightenment, for example. Secular society offers a variety of religious understandings of this sense, as well as a variety of understandings that do not refer to the divine. Some psychological characterizations are of self-esteem or self-actualization. Other secular ideals of a ‘good life’ include the accrual of great wealth or fame. Although few, if any of us, fully realize these ideals, our experience in relation to them gives meaning to our lives³. Whether we feel like we are in contact with, or at a distance from these places of fullness, they give significance to our lives as projects of working towards them.

Religious believers orient to a divinely grounded place of fullness. The Christian expression is of salvation from the temporal life of sin into an eternal afterlife in communion with God. Religions include systems of morality that equip believers to orient their current lives towards this salvation. For example, the promise of an afterlife gives significance to suffering in the present, and a framework of sin and virtue lends meaning to a moral code.

An unbeliever takes advantage of the possibility of a meaningful life independent of the divine. In this case, the place of fullness in life is found *within* human life. Taylor discusses some of the historical trends that have allowed

³ The fullness offered by the afterlife is inherently unrealizable while one still lives.

secular society to support an ‘exclusive humanism’. The Enlightenment ideal of human reason provides an example of this ‘inner’ source of fullness. The works of Kant, Freud, and Darwin all support exclusively human versions of ‘a good life’. Kant’s universal imperative demands that if we exercise our nature as rational beings, we can determine a moral system *for ourselves*. Kant bases his justification for the existence of God and the afterlife on the structure of *human* life. Darwin’s theory of natural selection has motivated many expressions of a ‘good life’. Watered down versions of evolutionary psychology are espoused on every street corner as justifications for the way that people live. In his *Future of an Illusion*, Freud looked forward to the day when human, scientific reason would overcome neurosis and society would not depend on religion to allay our neuroses. The Romantic suspicion of the Enlightenment ideal of the primacy of reason nonetheless continued the trend toward the possibility of exclusive humanism. In this case, the best life was one that gives full expression to feeling and passion. The ideal of ‘authenticity’, as used by the Romantics, was of full expression of one’s inner life – the idea that “each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity” (Taylor, 2007, p. 475). The Romantic ideal is that a person can find a source of fullness within oneself. As an alternative to both the Enlightenment ideal of reason and the Romantic ideal of inner expression, some forms of existentialism deny the power of human reason or expression entirely, along with religion, claiming that there is no place of fullness in life. In this case, a ‘good life’ consists in the courage to continue living despite the absence of God and the weakness of both reason and feeling. Each of these historical trends show

the emergence of ‘human’ sources of meaning. These provide the foundation of the way that secular society makes an ‘exclusively human’ moral life possible.

iii. The middle position

All of the above examples are of sources of fullness that are impossible to fully realize. We cannot ‘become divine’; we cannot be entirely rational or express ourselves entirely. Most people, most of the time, live somewhere between the place of fullness and the place of alienation. A person rarely lives a completely ‘full’ life, and rarely is a complete failure in aspiring to this fullness. We live somewhere in the middle. We have a sense of a fullness to which we aspire, and of what its absence entails. In Christian terms, we have not reached heaven, yet we are also not damned to hell; life on earth is a ‘middle position’; not-yet having reached heaven, but never losing the hope it offers. Our everyday interactions with others demonstrate that secular life generally consists of this middle position. In fact, people of all kinds of creeds and worldviews espouse this middle position daily as something to be desired in itself. We have all heard, and likely even said ourselves, the phrase “I just want to be good to my family, happy in my career, and take some pleasure in my life”. Knowing that we cannot experience fully sustained contact with the place of fullness, we tend to take this middle position as a goal in itself in our experience of meaning in life. Rather than requiring full communion with God, or with Reason, or with Nature in order to lead a meaningful life, we aspire to live in the condition where glimpses of these infuse our ordinary, everyday lives with meaning.

This idealization of the middle position relieves much of the potential tension that could stem from possible incompatibility of beliefs with one's neighbors and those with whom one lives every day. This 'middle position' does not require rich articulation, as is required by many religious, scientific or political construals of fullness. One can aim to live a 'good enough' life by doing everyday things well. One can imagine a Christian, a Muslim and a radical atheist all publicly aspiring to this middle condition. When most people in society aim for a well-lived ordinary life, religious or ideological differences are not threatening. While this middle position does not require rich articulation, it does support it. Secular society is one that supports the possibility of a richly articulated 'ordinary life', alongside the multitude of religious possibilities, which all take as a moral anchor the task of living this middle position *well*. A discussion of the ideal of *authenticity* according to which an 'ordinary life' can be richly articulated concludes this thesis.

iv. A structural analogy

Thus, Taylor argues that there is a "structural analogy" (2007, p. 7) in the experiences of both believers and unbelievers in secular society. We generally aspire to a well-lived ordinary life, which we articulate according the various sources of fullness that infuse it with meaning. A Christian aspires to a fulfilling life in his family, career and community, and glimpses the divine in harmonious relationships, and following his 'calling' in his career and community involvement. An unbeliever aspires to the same kind of fulfilling life, yet gives a

different account of the place of fullness that gives it meaning, perhaps in the triumph of a human endeavor that improves the lives of others. Looking around, we can see that other people are living ordinary and meaningful lives just like ourselves, yet are offering a variety of accounts of meaning. We easily live next door to people with whom we disagree, because our lives are largely the same – notwithstanding our different accounts of meaning and perhaps different diet, wardrobe or day of worship. We recognize that there are other possible ways of construing the meaning of our lives within secular society, and for the first time, we notice that our own beliefs are not necessarily the only possible ones.

v. Belief as a construal of experience

The distinction between lived experience and its construal is a central feature of secular society. The realization that many people have very similar kinds of experience, yet give different accounts of its meaning, leads to the consideration of systems of belief as ways to construe lived experience. For the first time, Taylor writes, we take religious belief to be a “construal *of* experience” (Taylor, 2007, p. 11), where believers in previous societies could make no such distinction. Believers in secular society often distinguish between lived experience in the immanent frame and transcendent explanations *of* that experience; in contrast to pre-secular societies where there spirits were just as

real as rocks and trees, and religion was the simple articulation of experience in this ‘enchanted’ world⁴.

The relevance of this modern distinction between experience and knowledge is twofold. First, it changes the shape of religious belief in secular society. Given the recognition of religion *as* a system of belief in the presence of other possibilities, believers no longer hold the naïve faith of previous societies. Instead, they recognize the ‘index of doubt’ against which they establish their faith, and often ask themselves ‘Is this *really* true, do I *really* believe this?’ Second, it opens up the possibility of psychology itself, by distinguishing lived experience as an independent domain that requires construal, whether religious or exclusively human. Psychology offers a secular construal of human experience – as that of an individual in possession of an ‘identity’. Secular society is one in which religion and psychology both serve to construe experience.

C. *Exclusive Humanism*

Taylor writes that an ‘exclusively human’ moral option has emerged as a moral ideal that anchors the ‘middle position’ as a moral domain in itself. In secular society where any construal of experience is only one among others, the ordinary life of everyday human experience has become a moral domain in itself, where one finds meaning in life. Most of us tend to live in a ‘middle condition’ between full contact with and alienation from the source of fullness in life, and

⁴ To use Taylor’s terminology where he discusses the ‘disenchantment’ of the modern world in *A Secular Age*.

we take human flourishing (that is, the best ‘ordinary life’ of happiness, stability, etc) as an ideal itself⁵.

The development of Christianity played a significant role in the carving out of an exclusively human moral domain, as Taylor writes in his discussion of the ‘Great Disembedding’ of meaning. When Christianity posits a transcendent God, it forges a distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, where no such distinction previously existed. While, for the Christian, the human world is still meaningful in relation to the divine, and despite any possible interactions between these worlds (in miracles, prayer, the incarnation, God as the creator and maintainer of the world) a new sense that humans live ‘in the world’ and God dwells ‘in heaven/eternity’ develops. With the emergence of a distinct ‘human’ domain, the possibility that the meaning of one’s life can be found in ‘living well’ in this domain also emerges. Modern, secular moral agency is found in articulating what kind of life is a ‘good life’ in these human terms. An exclusively human option for moral agency allows a person to articulate what it means to live a ‘good’, ‘fulfilled’, or ‘meaningful’ life, and to establish an identity, without reference to God. Secular society has not done away with religious faith (that is, with reference to the divine), but has opened up another possibility for living one’s life.

⁵ The final chapter of this thesis outlines how this can be richly articulated in the ideal of authenticity.

3. INDIVIDUALISM

A. *Competition or Coexistence?*

The previous chapter followed Taylor's premise that secular society is one in which there are multiple possibilities for construing experience/understanding life, including the exclusive humanism of which psychology is one form. Psychology tends to stand in a hostile relation to religion, explaining religion away in psychological terms. This tendency is not just a side-note to understanding the relation between psychology and religion because it reflects the very fundamental way that psychology seeks to apply the same kind of objective knowledge to human life that other sciences apply to the natural world. According to a large part of psychology, the relation between psychology and religion is one of competition between two explanations of human experience – with psychology clearly being the more 'modern' and 'scientifically grounded' of the two. If the modern trend to distinguish between the objectivity of knowledge and the subjectivity of experience can be applied to human lives, then the position of psychology is a sound one. However, scholarship ranging from Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences, to certain aspects of post-modern critique resists this notion⁶. Charles Taylor extends the hermeneutic argument that binds knowledge and experience together into his discussion of secular society and modernity in general. For Taylor, social practice and lived experience

⁶ Which, although diverse and not programmatic, includes those whose project is to critique the notion that knowledge can be isolated from life. A major thrust of Michel Foucault's writing, for example, is the argument that knowledge is caught up in systems of power and social practice.

provide the foundation for all understanding of human life. This discussion presents an alternative to the claim that psychology and religion compete to explain basic human experiences, where only one construal can be 'right'. Instead, this chapter claims that because psychology and religion are both grounded in the individualism of the modern social imaginary, they need not be in direct competition.

I will follow Taylor's discussion of some of the key features of the development of secular society, beginning with his discussion of the 'porous self' of previous societies which did not distinguish between experience and its construal, and the 'buffered self' of contemporary society whose experience is individual, self-contained and distinguishable from its construal. This change, from a 'porous' to a 'buffered' self reflects a changing *social imaginary*, which is, for Taylor, a general sense of the world, carried by social practices, and which shapes the kind of experience that is possible (Taylor, 2007, 171). Taylor reminds us that we are more or less 'engaged' in the way we construe life; that is, while we are able to reflect on our beliefs and theories about life, we still experience them as *real*. The modern social imaginary, which connects our understandings of the world with our lived experience, and emphasizes individualism, is the foundation of secular society, and the possibility of a 'buffered' self. Thus, psychology and modern forms of religion both depend on a certain form of life that a modern social imaginary opens up.

B. *Porous vs Buffered Self*

A modern individual is able to reflect on the way he lives and distinguish between experience and its construal. People regularly look for ‘explanations’, and try to ‘make sense’ of their experience – often considering a variety of explanations, including the latest popular psychological theory. Religious believers and unbelievers all recognize that psychology and religion both construe, or make sense of, experience. Yet the ability to make this distinction was not always possible. Taylor writes about this change from pre-secular, ‘religious’ societies, where one could not intelligibly separate one’s lived experience from the religious accounts that dominated the society in which one lived. The difference, for example, is between questioning God today and in previous societies. Today, one can question the existence of God and reflect on different ways of making sense of the world with relative ease; in fact, this questioning is often encouraged, even in religious communities. In contrast, believers in previous societies only questioned God with great trepidation, unable to conceive of a world independent of religion.

This radical change is summarized by Taylor as the move from a ‘porous’ self who is fundamentally embedded in a meaningful world, to a ‘buffered’ self for whom meaning is individually established within meaning-neutral contexts. A porous self lives in a world where meaning and agency are not strictly internal experiences. In pre-secular societies “things and agencies which were clearly extra-human could alter or shape our spiritual and emotional condition, and not just our physical state, ... but both together in one act” (Taylor, 2007, 40). Good and evil spirits inhabited the world, and were not always distinguished from

features of the natural world. Lived experience, in a very real way, was constituted in large part by forces outside human control. Those things that today we experience as internal events (hope, despair, joy, guilt etc.) were experienced as originating ‘outside’ oneself, from the action of spirits, or some contact with some powerful part of nature. The Greek notion of bodily humors is an example of this kind of vulnerability to external influence; various traits of what we would call ‘personality’ were directly linked to certain concentrations of bodily fluids, which were not distinguished from the physical world. Similarly, sinfulness was linked with physical sickness and demon possession was manifest in the body. Taylor calls this experience of self ‘porous’ because there is no clear distinction between personal agency and the agencies of society, nature, or spirits in the constitution of human experience. For a person in such a society, religion is not a set of ‘beliefs’ but is a direct expression of lived experience. Disbelief, Taylor points out, is not really an option for this ‘porous’ self, because to reject God would mean to take one’s chances in the world of spirits (both good and evil) with no protection.

In contrast, the ‘buffered self’ that is characteristic of modern, secular society, lives in a ‘disenchanted’ world. Taylor writes that “partly as a result of the scientific revolution, the cosmos faded, and we find ourselves in a universe’ (Taylor, 2007, 60) The increasing tendency to see the universe in terms of the mechanisms by which it functions strips it of its previously inherent meaning. Some of the central figures of modernity make the distinction between human life and the external world with an ever-decreasing radius around the individual: the

physical world according to Newton, the biological world according to Darwin, and the individual according to Freud. The previously 'enchanted' world is unavailable for a modern, 'buffered' self; meaningful interaction with the world now only proceeds through a subject/object dichotomy, where we are the sole agents in an objective world. This new experience of self involves a "very different existential condition" (Taylor, 2007, 38), wherein a buffered self is able to take a disengaged view of the causes of one's experience, and to master the meaning of one's own experience, which is an "opportunity for self-control and self-direction" (Taylor, 2007, 38).⁷ This buffered self, able to step back from the influence of his surroundings and consider his moral experience as an individual, is a central character in the rise of the possibility of the exclusive humanism characteristic of secular society.

Taylor stresses the magnitude of this change:

"Our first self understanding was deeply embedded in society. Our essential identity was as a father, son, etc. and member of this tribe. Only later did we come to conceive of ourselves as free individuals. This was not just a revolution in our neutral view of ourselves, but involved a profound change in our moral world, as is always the case with identity shifts." (Taylor, 2007, 157)

The modern focus on the individual comes out of a change in the way that we experience and understand self-hood, and is thus a radical departure from the pre-modern mode of experiencing and understanding the world.

⁷The causes of experience can now be construed as 'explanations', rather than direct impingements by spirits or other external forces or agencies.

This shift to a buffered self does not mean that we establish ideals or beliefs in a vacuum, where ‘anything goes’, or where we can make a simple ‘choice’ between psychology and religion in understanding our lives. As Taylor writes,

“we learn our identities in dialogue... (with the contexts in which we remain, yet) ...what we may learn... (about our identities, about our beliefs)... is to be an individual, to have our own opinions, to attain to our own relation to God, our own conversion experience.” (Taylor, 2007, 157)

The individualism of secular society does not mean that we are free to ‘make up’, in isolation, whatever beliefs we choose as individuals. Rather, where our personhood was formerly entwined within an entire hierarchy that included the social and natural worlds, and God, we now live *as individuals*; in relation to, but distinct from these contexts. Taylor says that the buffered self does not limit our experience to individualism at the expense of community. Rather, “a buffered self is essentially a self who is aware of the *possibility* of disengagement. And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one’s whole surroundings, natural and social.” (Taylor 2007, 42, my emphasis) Thus, in secular society, we are generally engaged in the construal of experience (which may be religious beliefs or psychology, among others) that is the ‘default’ mode of living as articulated within our communities, or milieux. Yet we are able, in principle, to modify or re-articulate our moral background and reshape the way we construe experience (Taylor, 2007, 14). The rise of the ‘buffered self’ allows individuals and communities in a secular society to recognize religions and other

understandings of experience *as such*, and allows secular society to support multiple religions and theories of life.

C. *Individualism*

Individualism pervades our society; one only needs to look at the modern emphasis on human rights, individual self-fulfillment, and the explicit value we place on mutual respect and the ability to pick our own values⁸. Individualism firmly grounds psychology. By almost any definition, historical or contemporary, psychology has to do with the study of individual humans, in some form. The psychoanalytic movement was primarily concerned with the dynamics of instinct and repression as they shaped the consciousness of individuals. The humanistic movement, exemplified largely by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, is concerned with the individual. Rogers states that the goal of therapy is that a person will become “more self-directing and self-confident; will become more of a person, more unique and self-expressive.” (Vitz, 1977, 21) Not only does Rogers demonstrate the individualistic methods of his therapy, this quote also reflects Rogers’ basic understanding of what a *person* is: an individual. Likewise, the path to Maslow’s ideal of ‘self-actualization’ begins with basic physiological needs and passes through the need for ‘self-esteem’ before reaching the pinnacle of self-actualization, which is characterized by self-acceptance, autonomy, and creativity. The behaviourist and cognitive movements within psychology

⁸ Specific examples abound, from the way our society explicitly protects free speech, religious tolerance and the like. Taylor also points out how the debate surrounding abortion is in large part centred on a woman's freedom to choose, where the choice itself is the most important consideration. (Taylor, 2007, 479)

displayed the same individualistic trend. Behaviourists studied *individual* behaviour, and cognition is taken to be an internal, individual process. Contemporary social psychology is dominated by this individual focus. Modern individualism shapes not only psychology, but also contemporary forms of religion. It is expressed in many forms, from the importance of a ‘personal relationship’ with God, to the importance of individual religious experience. Individualism runs through our entire society. This shared understanding of a person as a ‘buffered’ individual, that pervades secular society, reflects a specific form of what Taylor calls a ‘social imaginary’.

D. *Social Imaginaries*

The rise of the ‘buffered self’ reflects, according to Taylor, a changing *social imaginary*; one that supports the possibility that both psychology and religion may have something to say about personhood. By ‘social imaginary’, Taylor is describing the way that society makes sense of the world, according to a background of shared practices and understandings. A social imaginary opens certain possibilities for moral action and theories about the structure of society. A single source does not fully articulate it; rather, it is the general and largely taken-for-granted understanding of the social world that is available to all members of society in everyday life.

Taylor provides a threefold definition of the term ‘social imaginary’ (Taylor, 2007, 172). First, it denotes the ways that ‘ordinary people imagine their social surroundings’. The way a person is understood to relate to a community

and how communities relate to the wider world allows one to distinguish between possible actions and commitments. For example, Taylor writes that the modern trend is to view society as for the “mutual benefit of individuals, and the defense of their rights” (Taylor, 2007, 160). This contrasts with previous imaginaries that stressed, for example, the importance of knowing and avowing one’s place within society. Each of these possibilities opens up a different form of life, where certain commitments are significant, yet it is not necessary for each individual to have a social imaginary fully ‘worked out’. A largely tacit understanding of one’s relation to the social world structures the possibilities that one sees in life. For example, taking a new job in another city would be inconceivable in some other societies, perhaps because it would betray one’s family and community, while this is a regular occurrence in our society. In our society, we respect one who takes such a chance to ‘find myself’, ‘explore new opportunities’, or ‘further my career’.

Second, Taylor stresses the distinction between a formal ‘theory’ and the social imaginary that supports such an explicit articulation of communal experience. A theory that is an articulation of communal meaning can be familiar to a minority within society, while a social imaginary belongs to a much larger segment, up to the whole of a society. Put differently, educated minorities within society can propose and discuss explicit theories of society, even while the majority of society is unable to make such an articulation. Secular examples of this articulation of a social imaginary into a specific theory or belief system include both psychology and religion. Only small segments of society debate

psychological theory or theology, and while the general population may be unable to make these articulations, they could, when asked, come up with a ‘popular theory’ of social life that includes the notions of individuality, responsibility etc. that are also central to these debates of specific minorities. Explicit ‘theories of life’ such as psychology and religion are formal articulations of these wider ways of ‘imagining’ the world; and the specific psychological theories and articulations of religion which we have today are therefore unique to a *modern* social imaginary.⁹

Third, a social imaginary depends on common social practices within a society, and these practices open up a common sense of ‘meaning’ in life. While the majority of a society does not explicitly articulate a social imaginary, they demonstrate familiarity with it by recognizing and engaging in certain practices that the imaginary opens up. For example, the individualist emphasis of the modern social imaginary is demonstrated in the political, legal and economic activities in which people participate. We know how to vote and what it means; we know how to demonstrate; we know how to navigate the legal system in defense of our rights; we know how to operate a business. By contrast, a medieval person would not have the same facility with democratic action, considerations of individual rights, or capitalist endeavors. The political, legal and economic spheres of life in modernity, are institutions that reflect an

⁹ A religious example is the modern emphasis on individual responsibility, authenticity of faith, and a ‘personal relationship with God’. Psychology derives from the same imaginary, as it studies people as individuals, whose motivations and experiences are internal and bounded from the rest of the world.

emphasis on individuality; our participation in them demonstrates our tacit understanding of this social imaginary.

E. *The extension of social imaginary into society: the hermeneutic/prescriptive axis*

Taylor writes that a social imaginary extends itself into the whole of society along a *hermeneutic/prescriptive axis*. On the hermeneutic end of the axis, a social imaginary makes possible certain articulations of the nature of society. Taylor's example is of the medieval Christian idea that society is a "community of saints, inspired by love for God, for each other, and for humankind, whose members were devoid of rivalry, mutual resentment, love of gain, ambition to rule, and the like" (Taylor, 2007, 161). While few medieval Christians may have lived up to this standard, they generally understood that God would establish this kind of society as his kingdom. Meanwhile, the ideal served as an articulation of the moral order of the world, against which one could evaluate one's own life. We see something similar today, in the belief that individuals who are equal participants make up society; in the democratic ideal of each person having a say in government, and the legal enshrinement of individual rights. Where the medieval Christian may examine his own life in relation to the ideals of religious self-sacrifice, a modern individual can examine his own life in relation to the ideals of individuality as imagined in democratic ideals of individual freedom. The way we *imagine* personhood and society establishes a

background understanding (of which there may be a variety of explicit formulations) by which we can live morally significant lives.

On the other end of the axis, the formulation of ideals that we are compelled to fulfill also extend a social imaginary. These formulations are, like the previous examples, formulations of ideals we do not currently fulfill, but unlike the previous, we should. The medieval religious example has a prescriptive side. The religious understanding of society was not just an *idea*, but was maintained by its formalization in the institution of the church, the compilation of scripture, and a recognizable community of 'Christians'. The church required participation and prescribed a specific lifestyle according to a specific morality, anchored by the notions of sin and salvation. Secular society seems to be one in which there is no prescriptive understanding of the world; we are free to follow any belief system or none at all. However, while the modern social imaginary imposes no *specific* moral system, we are compelled to maintain the individual freedoms that are central to secular society. We are compelled to respect those who hold beliefs different from our own, and are encouraged to keep our religious commitments distinct from our public life. Contemporary issues such as the recent French motion to ban the burqa, similar to the long-standing Turkish ban on the burqa for those who hold public office, demonstrate that the secular ideal of individualism is not only an *opportunity* for personal agency, it is *prescribed* by the modern social imaginary that supports secularity. One *must* be an individual if one is to participate in secular society; no matter what one's religious commitments are.

F. *Conclusion*

The modern social imaginary that is characteristic of secular society construes human experience as individual in nature, and essentially independent from the contexts in which one lives. The variety of theories and beliefs that people live by are all perfectly acceptable within secular society because they are all accounts of *individual* human experience. Secular society does not necessarily position psychology and religion as competing explanations for human life. Both psychology and modern forms of religion are expressions of the modern emphasis on individuality. As secular society is a context in which it is possible to construe human experience according to any number of specific articulations of the modern social imaginary, there is room for both psychology and religion as authorities on human life.

4. SCIENCE OR RELIGION?

A. Introduction

Two main arguments have been developed in the previous chapters. First, the distinction between experience and construal characterizes secular society and has led to its emergence as a domain in which multiple articulations of the way we construe experience are possible. Second, psychology and religion are both articulations of the modern social imaginary, which emphasizes the individual nature of human experience. Thus far, these arguments do not give a satisfactory answer to the question of the nature of the relation between psychology and religion. The present chapter builds on the arguments made thus far in order to address this question. It was noted earlier that psychology tends not to recognize that religion is a valid construal of experience; instead reducing religion to a problem for psychology. We are left with studies of the ‘psychology of religion’, or with social psychological studies that demonstrate the psychological benefits of religious practice. The attitude towards religion within psychology is generally either hostile or dismissive. On the other hand, the multitude of religious communities in our society holds a multitude of attitudes towards psychology. It is impossible to generalize these into a concise statement, other than to say that it is complicated and uneasy. For the religious believer facing some kind of crisis in life, there is an immediate decision to make between seeing a psychologist or a priest. There is no clear understanding within many religious circles on how to make this decision. Religious believers are often skeptical of psychology, even

while some forms of modern religious practice have similarities with psychology: in the ‘self-help’ overtones of many sermons, and in the emphasis on personal responsibility.

Building on the previous chapters, the argument of this thesis continues with the claim that psychology is a modern expression of the motivation towards meaning in life, a motivation that religion has historically fulfilled, and continues to fulfill for many people. For this reason, the human motivation towards the *meaning* of human experience is referred to as a religious motivation in this thesis. Because religion is often identified solely with the monotheism of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the claim that psychology is a secular expression of religious motivations is, at first glance, a strange one. Yet while the concept of a ‘Divine God’ is a common feature of formal religion, and while we are following Taylor’s working understanding of religion as distinguishing between the transcendent and the immanent, this foundation in the divine does not necessarily support a universal definition of religion. Taylor demonstrates this in his discussion of the “great disembedding” of meaning, which is a key stage in the process of secularization in western society. He writes of pre-secular life in which meaning and significance imbues the entire world, where religion had less to do with claims of a transcendent God and more to do with spelling out the place of people within an already meaningful world. In the transition to secular life, religion has come to provide a transcendent foundation for the meaning we experience in our daily lives. This ‘disenchantment’ of the world coincided with the development of religion as an institutionalized system of faith in a divine

order that gives our world meaning. Clifford Geertz offers a complementary definition of religion that does not refer to the divine, emphasizing that a religious understanding of the world makes life particularly meaningful. Geertz (1966) defines religion as:

"(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic"

These 'moods and motivations' are the general shape of a person's experience, a shape to which Taylor refers when he emphasizes the experience of meaning or significance in life. Just as Geertz describes these as being oriented towards a real and meaningful world, Taylor writes that we experience meaning in relation to the 'background of significance' by which we make sense of the world. Furthermore, just as Geertz writes that we navigate this relation through symbols, for Taylor, our understanding of the world proceeds from the articulation of our experience. Thus, for both Geertz and Taylor, a notion of 'the divine' is one way in which the order of the world is articulated; but not necessarily the only possible one.

For the purposes of this paper, religious motivations are those that strive to make sense of human experience through its articulation into a set of practices and beliefs about the general nature of the world. These motivations can find expression in formal religions, where ultimate claims of the divine provide a foundation for the general nature of the world. Secular society has distinguished

an exclusively human domain, and in this domain, the motivation towards meaning in life can be expressed in a variety of ways that do not include claims of an ultimate or divine foundation. I will argue that psychology is an example of this kind of secular expression of religious motivations.

As the second chapter of this paper argued, psychology is rooted in a modern social imaginary, which places an individual emphasis on human experience. Yet while Taylor conceives of social imaginaries as emerging from within communities, psychology denies its roots as a culturally specific way of understanding experience, instead positing its methods and its object of study ('identity', or 'the self') as independent of social practice, and therefore objective. The atrophied subject that is at the centre of much 'objective' psychological research, composed of testable properties, faculties and capacities, bears little resemblance to our experience of selfhood in daily life. While humanistic psychology, the target of Paul Vitz's argument in *Psychology as Religion*, vehemently denies any objectification of 'the self', its emphasis on the *subjectivity* identity leaves it with an ill-defined, superficial notion of 'the self' that nonetheless upholds the modern distinction between subject and object, between 'self' and 'world'. The importance of 'real-life' life may surface in humanistic or therapeutic schools such as Rogerian therapy, but any semblance of scientific rigor is lost. Psychology, fundamentally flawed as a scientific pursuit, pulls in two directions, lacking scientific rigor, real life relevance, or both. Vitz argues that psychology, primarily of the humanistic school, functions as a secular form of religion. I will develop this argument through Taylor's discussion of

identity, which he describes as an articulation of the significance of experience *within* the world. According to this understanding of identity, psychology's reliance on a subject-object dichotomy that takes identity to be isolable from its contexts precludes its inclusion in the natural sciences.

As far as psychology is concerned with 'identity' or 'the self', it is an expression of the religious motivation towards meaning, because personhood is structured around the human experience of meaning in life. Because secular society supports a variety of articulation of meaning in life, psychology is not a replacement for religion; it is not an alternative to religion. Where the secular context already includes a number of formal religions where one's construal of experience is developed within a framework of meaning grounded in the divine, psychology offers an exclusively human construal of experience which nonetheless supports inquiries into questions of *identity*; questions which proceed from the religious motivation towards meaning. Psychology does not avow the religious motivations of the questions of identity to which it attends, leaving it generally unable to provide any answers about *meaning* in life.

B. Psychology as Science

The claim that psychology is a form of religion runs contrary to the idea of psychology as a science. To make this claim, it is prudent to discuss the scientific

status of psychology. Can psychology be considered an objective science?

Psychology has attained to the status of a natural science; taking the 'self', or specific aspects of human experience, to be the object of its study in the same way that the natural sciences take the natural world as theirs. Experimental social psychology is the primary example of this concern with being a science, even while studying 'the self'. It operationalizes 'the self' or aspects of selfhood, such as 'self-esteem', 'self-concept' and the like and uses them as experimental variables. These experiments aim for 'generalizability', and 'statistical significance'; all reflections of this concern with 'being a science'. The trend towards scientific objectivity is central to modernity. It is intended to distinguish knowledge from the subjectivity of human experience, in order to produce universal, predictive explanations of the natural world.

Psychology pursues a 'self' that has become increasingly distinguished and isolated from the world (including our own bodies) through the process of developing objective standards in the natural sciences. In a sense, 'the self' becomes an object as a function of its own relentless objectification of the world. Psychology reverses the process of objectifying the external world by turning it inward and developing objective explanations of human experience. Natural science psychology abstracts the human subject from lived experience in order to develop objective explanations. Recently, the social construction movement has rightly criticized the essentialist notion of selfhood inherent in natural science model of psychology, arguing instead that the 'self' is a product of social discourse. This is a valuable critique, yet while some social construction accounts

of identity are richer than others the movement as a whole fails to reunite identity with lived experience. Despite demonstrating the mechanics of *how* identity is negotiated through social discourse, social constructionism does not address the lived experience in which this negotiation is meaningful. The social construction movement remains at the level of examining the how the concept of identity is used in discourse, and cannot support a theory of personhood or the meaning of experience. While these two approaches to psychology, the natural science model and the social construction model, are directly opposed to each other, they remain opposed on a common scale. Their epistemological standards and methods vary, but both the natural science model and the social construction model of psychology are strictly modern in that they take the 'self' to be an object of knowledge, independent of lived experience. Any investigation of human life that submits lived experience to disciplinary abstractions or concepts cannot support a rich articulation of the experience of meaning in human life. Thus, psychology cannot be a science. This does not preclude a rigorous or detailed understanding of human life. It only means that the central concern of a scientific psychology cannot be the meaning of lived experience. In his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Wilhelm Dilthey (1991) distinguishes between human sciences (psychology included) and the natural sciences. He argues that this problem of approaching human life objectively misconstrues objectivity itself. Psychology has fallen under the illusion that objectivity is somehow a self-evident standard of truth to which we must submit human life. Dilthey turns this view upside-down, writing that objectivity is an outcome of human experience, suitable for

explaining the external world. I will use Dilthey's distinction between the human and the natural sciences to argue that the natural sciences cannot provide the model for psychology.

Dilthey is best known for his distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften*, (translated as the 'science of the spirit', or 'human sciences') and *Naturwissenschaften* (translated as the 'natural sciences'). The natural sciences abstract phenomena from lived experience in order to *explain* them causally. The human sciences, Dilthey argues, must interpret the relation between phenomena (identity, experience) and the context of the human world as a whole, in order to *understand* them. This is a hermeneutic approach, where lived experience is expressed within a world of meaning, that Dilthey calls the 'objectified human spirit', such as art, religion, language and the like in order to make sense of it. The self, for Dilthey, is not the starting point of human understanding, but the outcome. Dilthey argues that it emerges from the process of differentiating one's self from the world, through the growing awareness of the relation between one's acts of will and resistance from the world. Understanding this relation constitutes our sense of an 'inner' self and an 'outer' world. The self is always a 'developing whole', which, through this history of differentiation, moves from being determined by the world to developing the freedom to exercise one's will in the world. An infant has little sense of 'self', little sense of what parts of his experience belong to 'him' and what belongs to 'the world'. In this condition, he has little control over his life. As he begins to differentiate himself from the world, learning how to *do* things, the child becomes aware of himself as

a specific 'self'. Dilthey's discussion of self-understanding shows that identity is not something concrete and unchanging, suitable for experimental manipulation, nor is it something that we 'discover' through a process of learning about ourselves, as if it is some kind of internal essence. Instead, it is the result of differentiating lived experience into my 'self' and 'the world', and the continual process of interpreting my experience in relation to that world. Dilthey writes that our experience as a 'self' is manifest in our actions and expressions, and that these expressions, along with those of other people, form an 'objective human spirit' (art, economy, religion, law, folklore) in relation to which we understand ourselves in even greater depth. The natural sciences can take an objective view of the external world, because once it has been distinguished from the 'self' and the world of 'objectified human spirit', it is no longer constituted by reflection upon lived experience. However, the human sciences never isolate their domain of study from lived experience; they are human practices directed not outward to an external world, but inward, to the world of human experience. Therefore, they cannot provide objective explanations, but interpreted understandings. Dilthey's influence on Taylor is clear where Taylor discusses the social imaginary: that largely implicit background idea of 'what the world is like' against which the meaning of our experience is shaped is reminiscent of Dilthey's 'objective human spirit'.

This line of argument precludes the possibility of modeling psychology after the natural sciences. It is easy to see the attraction of the natural science model for psychology. The natural sciences boast great explanatory power,

concrete results and paradigmatic unity. The illusion of having this kind of power over our selves is very appealing. However, turning objectivity inwards towards human experience is a denial of the relation between knowledge and its foundation in lived experience. When psychology studies the ‘self’ as an object of knowledge, it denies its own roots. I will continue to develop this argument with specific regard to the problem of identity by turning to Taylor’s work, where he argues in concert with Dilthey, that identity is primarily a problem of lived experience, and that all knowledge of the ‘self’ proceeds from the articulation of this experience.

C. *Taylor on Identity*

When psychology takes the identity as its object of study, it tends to approach identity as something that can be studied as an object in the same way the natural world is objectified in the natural sciences. In much of psychology, identity is that object about which we try to increase our knowledge; if we can *know* our identities, we can explain our lives. Taylor opposes the view that one’s identity is an isolable object of knowledge that we can study in order to explain our lives. Taylor’s argument is a kind of reversal. Rather than knowledge about our identity required to make our experience meaningful through explanation, Taylor argues that we first *live* and that identity is the product of articulating meaning in life. Taylor argues, in contrast with psychology, that any knowledge of ‘identity’ is secondary to lived experience. In the following paragraphs, I will

explicate Taylor's argument that identity is the articulation of the meaning of one's lived experience.

a. Identity and lived values

Just as the previous chapters stressed the relation between lived practice and any kind of understanding, Taylor's argument that identity emerges from the articulation of one's relation to a moral background is one that grounds all self-knowledge in lived experience. For Taylor, what separates humanity from other life is our capacity for self-reflection: we consider 'who we are' (Taylor, 1985, 97). This process of reflection, of considering 'who I am', supports the human freedom to work on 'who *can* I be?' In order to reflect on these possibilities, one must evaluate what things are significant in one's life, and how committing to these things reflects on the kind of person that one is. The meaning of my life is established through my commitments within a world in which I, and my community, take certain things to be more significant or valuable than others. For example, a person can understand him or herself according to values, such as 'honour', or 'integrity' and the commitments, such as family or career, that are understood as important within one's community. Thus as one articulates how one engages the sources of meaning in one's life, one is articulating one's identity: as an 'honest businessman', or 'loving father'. To have an identity is to live well and stick to these commitments; it is not to live superficially, inconsistently, or in continual confusion. We run into problems with identity, perhaps in some kind of crisis of identity when what we think about ourselves and

how we want to live come into conflict with the things we really do. Taylor writes that "... we can speak of an 'identity-crisis' when we have lost our grip on 'who we are'." (Taylor, 1985, 35) For example, a man who thinks of himself as an involved father may find himself too caught up in career commitments to celebrate his child's birthday. He may convince himself that his avowed identity as a good father is consistent with his prioritizing his job over his child. He may however experience some kind of crisis of when he comes to recognize the tension between his identity and his actions. Taylor makes an explicit connection between identity and the way we structure our lives according to certain values we hold. He calls this ability to structure our own lives the capacity for *agency*; exercised when one commits to a certain form of life because it reflects on oneself as the 'kind of person' who would live in that way. Avowing an identity means that one claims a certain moral shape in life as one's own. Taylor states that depth of articulacy is closely connected with identity. (Taylor, 1985, 34) He says that identity is 'bound up with certain qualities I value' (Taylor, 1985, 34). If lineage features prominently in the way one understands oneself, it is because one's family history and the kinds of values that define it, such as the importance of family, are central to one's lived experience. A complementary example is someone who does *not* care about lineage, incorporating an individual and not familial history into one's self-understanding because one's experience is isolated from family ties. Likewise, personal characteristics, capacities, talents and the like only feature in identity if they are incorporated into the way one understands oneself. Taylor states that 'Our identity is therefore defined by certain evaluations

which are inseparable from ourselves as agents' (Taylor, 1985, 34). Thus, for Taylor, identity has to do with identifying and avowing those things are significant to our lives, which is moral articulacy about one's place in the social, historical and physical world. The implication is that any psychological approach to identity must be linked with moral articulacy, and must not attempt to study identity in isolation from these contexts. As the discipline of psychology explicitly intends to remove moral considerations from the study of 'the self', it denies the fundamentally moral/ontological shape of its object.

b. Identity and Articulation

How do we articulate the moral shape of our lives, in the process of establishing identity? If identity is not a process of simply increasing knowledge about one's identity as if it were an isolable property of one's life, then how does Taylor's 'moral articulacy' proceed? Taylor writes that it is the capacity to make choices according to their relative worth in the kinds of life that we want to live that makes us human. He calls it the capacity for 'strong evaluation', and as it requires self-reflection, it comprises his minimal understanding of 'personhood' (Taylor, 1985, 28). In establishing an identity, courses of action are not chosen on a whim. In order for our choices to say anything about who we are, they must be chosen because we understand them as worthwhile. While simple desire or whim can determine a 'weak' evaluation, it has no bearing on 'who I am'. However, when a person commits to a certain course of action because it is the *best* choice, this is a strong evaluation that reflects on that person's identity. It is not simply

‘picked’ or discovered; there are *many* possible ways to live, and to decide on one requires an *articulation* of why it is the best. This is how a strong evaluation, a decision that factors in one’s identity, may be articulated: “There are many ways to live, but because of *who I am*, THIS is the course of action I must follow”¹⁰.

Taylor compares strong and weak evaluations. This comparison emphasizes the centrality of lived experience to an understanding of identity. For Taylor, we do not learn about identity in the sterility of laboratories and questionnaires, but in the ambivalence and conflict that confront us in the decisions of daily life. It may be difficult to articulate one’s identity, but it is ultimately worthwhile, as it meaningfully structures one’s life. Of course, there is an easy way out in most situations we encounter. One can ‘do what I feel like’ – one chooses according to simple desire. These choices are made unreflectively, and do not support the integration of identity where choices we reflect upon also reflect upon identity. However, life is more complicated. Taylor offers the common situation where a choice *between* desired ends is required; a situation in which either a strong or a weak evaluation is possible. His example is of choosing between a holiday in the north and a holiday in the south (Taylor, 1985, 17). Simple desire can be the criteria for a weak evaluation of this situation, in terms of the quantity of pleasure one expects to derive in each situation, and the decision bears no weight on self-understanding. Even when invested with some reflective effort, in situations where desires compete, such as if the choice of one

¹⁰ Being ‘true to myself’ can be as easily superficial as it can be part of a strong evaluation. This kind of superficial use is addressed in the discussion of the ideal of authenticity in the final chapter.

holiday comes at the cost of the other, this evaluation is motivated by desiring certain outcomes, and consists of nothing more than a calculation of pleasure.

One can approach the same situation differently, where it is not simple desires being weighed, but what Taylor calls 'second order desires', which take the form 'what kind of desires do I want to have?' (Taylor, 1985, 15) These 'desires for desires' are the recognition that some desires are 'better', 'higher' or more 'worthy' than others, according to the life I want to live. A decision that is constitutive of identity is one that seeks these higher forms. Taylor writes that a strong evaluation is made according to what is taken to be the best, fullest, most worthy human life. The above example is transformed: deciding which holiday to take is no longer a calculation of desire in order to find out which option brings the most pleasure, but a weighing of the desires themselves in order to determine which one is more worthy – what kind of agent or person would have this or that desire. The choice of a holiday in the north or in the south can be evaluated in terms of the *quality* of the pleasure derived (adventure vs. relaxation, for example) and chosen accordingly. A strong evaluation bears directly on the way that one understands oneself, in this case, either as an adventurer vs. someone more 'laid back'. There are more obviously 'moral' (in the colloquial sense of the word) situations, such as Sartre's example of a young man called to war, even while his mother is on her deathbed, as described by Taylor (1985, 29). He must choose between 'goods'; either in favour of family commitment to care for his dying mother, or of honour and patriotism to go to war. A further example is of one who has the possibility for career advancement in a city far from his family home,

and must choose between competing courses of action, each of which has its own worth. No matter what one decides in these situations, the decision figures strongly in one's self-understanding and continued lived experience. These decisions implicate the one who makes them, by making that person the *kind of person* who decides according to this or that consideration. In a sense, psychology has it backwards in trying to isolate and understand identity in order to explain lived experience. Taylor's entire argument is that the way one navigates and articulates lived experience constitutes identity.

Why does Taylor place such a strong emphasis on articulation? Is it crucial that one is able to spell out one's identity? Taylor's discussion of articulation is a hermeneutic argument that locates identity in a co-constitutive relation with lived experience. Articulation is so important to identity because it is through the articulation of one's identity that one transforms one's lived experience and allows one to exercise one's will in the world¹¹. Articulating one's identity makes it real. Taylor describes the process of articulation. A strong evaluation, as opposed to a weak evaluation is made contrastively, comparing possible courses of action with others. (Taylor, 1985, 21) One only knows courage through a contrast with cowardice, honor in contrast to shame, virtue in contrast to vice. A weak evaluation is merely a calculation of pleasure, independent of any other consideration. Therefore, a strong evaluation requires a background against which one can make contrasts of worth; a background that has

¹¹ The irony of psychology is that in objectifying identity, it limits its articulation and can limit one's agency, rather than support it.

been established through a history of the lived experience of a person within his community. This is, for Taylor a 'moral background' because it is against this background that actions and ideals bear the moral weight of the *meaning* of lived experience. Each strong evaluation calls upon the whole of a person's moral experience; the significance of any specific situation depends on its relation to an entire moral background of a person in a community. Further, each new strong evaluation makes a finer distinction within the moral background; it *articulates* the moral background. An increasingly articulated moral background is suitable to support strong evaluations of increasing subtlety. A person who has an articulated facility with making these evaluations of worth is recognized as someone of depth. Thus, a background of moral significance tends, through strong evaluation, towards further articulation and the integration of ever-finer distinctions of worth. On the other hand, weak evaluations do not depend on this articulated moral background. If simple desire determines a choice rather than the *worth* of that desire, no comparison with a history of experience is required; the choice is made in complete isolation from any other. Therefore, weak evaluation does not integrate a background of moral significance, and situational contingency tends to determine one who operates according to weak evaluation. The difference between weak and strong evaluation is the fragmentation of desires on one hand, and on the other, the integration of the shape of our experience from being 'initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated' (Taylor, 1985, 36) into a coherent identity. Articulation is the process by which one establishes identity through the continual evaluation of one's life and

commitments. By the process of this articulation, one continually differentiates one's identity as a particular expression of the moral background according to which one's life is meaningful.

c. The 'standard' of identity

Closely tied to the notion of identity is a sense of 'getting it right', or conversely, having problems with it. Identity crisis, a term that originated within psychology, is a notion that has widespread currency in society as a whole. People go to 'see a psychologist' when problems with identity arise. Almost invariably, the psychological approach to identity in these cases is to pursue increased knowledge of one's 'self'. The goal of psychological intervention is for the psychologist to be able to know something about a person's identity (perhaps their 'self-esteem', 'aptitudes' or the like) and pass on this knowledge as an expert, or for the psychologist to help the client come to increased self-knowledge themselves (in the case of many forms of humanistic therapy). However, the problems that precipitate people seeking the expert advice of a psychologist do not stem from their concern with their self-knowledge, but with problems in their lived experience. If one's life is completely fulfilling and stable, that person will not seek out a psychologist (or be sent by someone else) no matter what apparent deficiency of self-knowledge they exhibit. Psychology tends to appeal to *knowledge* of identity to explain problems that people have in their everyday lives. According to Taylor's argument laid out here, this is a basic inconsistency. If lived experience is fundamental, and all self-knowledge derives from one's

articulation of that experience, we cannot hold some particular self-knowledge, derived from whatever psychological method, as the explanatory factor on lived experience. While Taylor emphasizes the importance of self-understanding, in the articulation of identity, the hermeneutic relation between that understanding and experience does not support the use of psychologically derived self-knowledge as an explanation for experience. Instead, there is a co-constitutional relation between the two; articulation gives shape to lived experience, and lived experience is a limiting factor on the articulations of meaning that one can make. In the case of psychological explanation, the standard for a solid identity would be logical coherence, or epistemological correctness, as verified by objective methods of investigation. Taylor counters by holding identity not to the standard of 'correctness', but of 'truthfulness' – a kind of faithfulness to the shape of lived experience. This standard of 'truthfulness' is supplied by the understanding of identity as emerging from the articulation of one's relation to a moral background. Identity must make sense as a coherent whole against a moral background of all possible articulations of identity.

Identity only becomes an issue, for which one may seek psychological help, when there is a (perhaps implicit) sense of its proper form. We, or others who know us, know what it means to have problems with our 'selves', whether classic 'psychological' problems, such as addictions, compulsions, neuroses and the like, or our inability to control our emotions or maintain our relationships. Much rests on the standards of truth to which we hold our notions of identity, because they can determine the 'proper form' identity should take, and the shape

of any intervention. How do the standards of psychology compare to those of Taylor, in their discussions of identity? Psychology uses the words ‘identity’, ‘self’, and all the related terms as, to use Taylor’s words, a representation “... which can be ‘satisfied’, or not, by some independently existing objects.” (Taylor, 1985, 277) The concept of identity, for psychology, is met according to a standard of ‘correctness’; psychology seeks to draw a representational link between its concepts and their manifestation in our lives. That is, when psychology investigates identity (or ‘self-concept’, ‘self-esteem’, ‘personality’) it holds its epistemological constructs in an explanatory relation to their referents in our lives¹². Psychology is set up as an authority on identity, which it adjudicates according to its representational theories. However, to continue the account developed above, Taylor writes ‘what we consider the essential human concerns are disclosed only in language’. (Taylor, 1985, 263) That is, because articulation constitutes our personhood, the notion of ‘identity’ cannot simply represent an independently existing property of our lives. Representation requires a dichotomy between a notion and its referent in order to be a viable tool for explaining phenomena. Yet because the articulation of lived experience into the conscious idea of identity is precisely how identity is established, no such dichotomy can be made between ‘identity’ as a concept and ‘identity’ as the shape of our lived experience. As Taylor writes, “self-understanding is constitutive of feeling”, (Taylor, 1985, 270) giving the example of emotions. He argues that we feel our

¹² Because psychology submits lived experience to its standards, it invariably finds that we do not quite match up to its smartly outlined concepts. Of course, psychology builds ‘individual differences’ into its accounts.

emotions as such when we articulate the conditions in which they occur. We feel sad, happy, guilty, relieved etc. as we avow the particular significance of how certain things in the world that we value affect us. To feel a specific and focused emotion such as a deep and justifiable anger requires the articulation of our experience according to certain values. I am angry when the values that I have articulated and make my life meaningful (family, justice etc) are threatened. With no articulation of values and no self-understanding, one cannot experience emotion with any clarity, nor distinguish between them. Inability to articulate the reasons why one is angry results in an unfocussed emotional response, like 'blind rage', that has no specific real-world direction. Articulating our emotions "brings to explicit consciousness what we formerly had only an implicit sense of" (Taylor, 1985, 257) The things we consider 'psychological', such as identity and emotions, are *not* objects of which we can have an epistemological referents, but emerge from their articulation in the context of one's life.

The articulation of identity is the evaluation of one's experience against a moral background, which is established through the history of evaluations of oneself and one's community. This background is what makes distinctions of worth meaningful, and therefore central to identity, because that which is evaluated as good, bad, evil, honourable etc. is always distinguished as a *particular* instance against a background of *general* goods, bads, evils, or honourables. It is impossible to distinguish a particular instance of anything if there is no sense of the general background from which it comes. One's identity must be an articulation of this relation: that I live out my particular 'personhood'

against a background of possible ways of living. Taylor's standard for a 'well articulated' identity is one that is coherent, and allows one to live meaningfully and to be able to exercise one's agency through further articulation. Just as strong evaluations tend towards the further articulation of a moral background, a coherent identity tends towards further integration of experiences and self-understandings. The coherence of identity, shaped by a history of moral experience, is not coherence of logical necessity, but of *meaningful relations*. One's identity must have a kind of integrity or coherence in order to support its articulation. The coherence of identity is the same kind of coherence as the moral evaluations that shape it. Strong evaluation depends on a history of similar evaluations within a community, a history that constitutes a moral background according to which further evaluations can be made. For further evaluation to have any significance, this moral background must have some coherence, or articulated order. In the same way, the integrity of the identity of an agent depends on its development in meaningful relation to its central features. The demand of a coherent identity does place limits on the possibilities of how we articulate identity; limits which keep us from senseless formulations of experience, or wild shifts in how we understand ourselves. These limits carve out a domain in which our agency, our capacity to constitute identity through its articulation is meaningful. Taylor (1985) writes that while our experience of identity depends on its articulation,

“it [does not] follow that our feelings can be changed at will by the descriptions we offer. Feelings are rather shaped by the descriptions that seem to us adequate. The formulations we offer

of our concerns are put forward in an attempt to get it right, and it is implicit in our practice that we recognize a category of ‘more or less accurate’ here.” (p 270)

Dilthey characterizes this relationship between the limits imposed by a standard of coherence when he writes that “the expression of lived experience does not fall under the judgment ‘true’ or ‘false’ but rather that of truthfulness and untruthfulness” (Dilthey, 1977, 131) . In *The Malaise of Modernity* Taylor introduces the term ‘authenticity’ to denote this demand of ‘getting it right’, ‘being true to myself’ etc. within a context of significance. The coherence of identity, which will be further discussed as authenticity, depends on ‘getting it right’ within the limits of the moral background in relation to which it is meaningful. In the final chapter, I will explore the possibility of a psychology that takes ‘authenticity’ seriously. For now, it suffices to show that identity cannot be held to the external, explanatory concepts offered by psychology, and that authenticity can serve as the ‘standard’ by which one continually articulates and seeks to cohere one’s identity.

D. Psychology as Religion

Psychology’s insistence on treating identity, or ‘the self’, as a discrete object of knowledge is a misconstrual of identity. To maintain psychology as a project focused on ‘the self’ obscures the basic motive of self-understanding: to make sense of the meaning of one’s experience. This motivation has historically been a religious one, and continues to be fulfilled by formal religions for many

people. As a science, psychology may be equipped to address some questions of *how* we live as individuals, but cannot address the sense-making that is central to identity. As Taylor argues, self-understanding comes from the articulation of one's lived experience within a social context structured according to a sense of what is significant in life. Yet psychology as a discipline trumpets a certain lack of articulacy about the 'self', treating it as a closed, categorizable and explainable epistemological problem, rather than as a project of continuing articulation. Thus as the practice of psychology hinders articulacy about 'the self' or 'identity', the motives which drive questions about these are obscured. As psychology becomes increasingly obsessed with its scientific status, it becomes further removed from serving as an authority on selfhood. Despite this distance and its own certain denials, psychology has not left the basic motive towards meaning behind. Psychology remains driven by the basic motive towards making sense of the meaning of human experience, despite its scientific pretenses. Thus, psychology employs a self-deceptive cover story at a disciplinary level, denying its own motivations, and leading to a fragmentation of the discipline.

Lacking any foundational theory (as any of the natural sciences) has led to the development of many forms of practice that claim to be 'psychology' yet have very little in common. Some press forward with a scientific agenda. Some of these deny any authority on the subject of identity and are therefore exempt from the specific critique presented in this paper. Others of these maintain the attempt at scientific studies of 'the self', notably much of experimental social psychology. A fairly recent development is the social constructionist critique of psychology as

science. This movement critiques the essentialism that natural scientists assume – that ‘identity’ is a *thing* that we all have and can be studied as such. On the social constructionist account, identity is a social construction; accomplished by evoking larger discourses of ‘identity’ through the specific ways it is talked about. Yet as social constructionists argue that all of our theories, social structures and understandings of reality emerge out of social interactions, they fail to ground identity in lived experience. That is, while social construction critiques natural science for its essentialism and for ignoring the importance of social life, it presents this critique from the opposite end of the same spectrum that takes identity to be an epistemological construct. For the social constructionist, identity is something that is talked *about*, rather than something constituted through its articulation. This ‘aboutist’ tendency directly mirrors the objectification of natural science psychology. The social constructionist movement talks a lot about ‘identity’ as a rhetorical tool, but has little to say about the real people for whom identity is a meaningful issue. For much of psychology, including both the natural science and the social constructionist approaches, the motivation towards meaning is obscured and denied, but not eliminated.

These forms of psychology can be critiqued on the basis that they are not actually doing what they claim to be doing. They obscure the primarily *lived* nature of ‘the self’ or ‘identity’ as long as they are engaged in a primarily epistemological project. In other words, the motivation towards meaning provides these forms of psychology with their central questions, yet psychology cannot address them as long as it is concerned with its scientific status. Another

form of psychology, the humanistic movement, which is at the centre of Paul Vitz's argument in *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of the Self* is not susceptible to these same critiques. Humanist psychologists are critical of objectification of 'the self' and are largely focused on the lives of real people, as is demonstrated by its widespread influence on counseling and therapy, as well as popular psychology. Yet because humanistic psychology is the form that is closest to real-life searches for meaning, it is most vulnerable to the critique that it functions as a religion. For Vitz, this means that psychology provides an ultimate moral ideal in 'the self' and a set of beliefs and practices (specific theories and understandings, books, therapies etc.) through which people can structure their lives in relation to this ideal. For Christians, God provides the anchor for the Christian worldview; for Psychology, Vitz argues, 'the self' anchors a life structured by the values of exclusive humanism.

In his chapter criticizing 'self-ism as bad science', Vitz writes that psychology makes an ethical/religious move in its idealization of 'the self', rather than one supported scientifically. He points out that psychology, particularly of the humanistic school that he focuses on, tends to take any self-defined goal or expression as self-evidently *good*, and resists the idea that the self has limits. Psychology promotes the ideal of 'the self' despite plentiful evidence that people are more aggressive, violent and deceitful than they are 'good', and that these characteristics are noticeably absent from the psychological 'self' (Vitz, 1977, 38). Vitz argues that humanistic psychology is organized around an

ethical/religious idealization of 'the self', rather than any scientifically derived notion of selfhood.

In addition to its foundation on the ideal of the self, rather than on scientific findings, psychology also functions as a religion of 'exclusive humanism'. Taylor's discussion of secular society, as discussed in the first chapter, characterizes it as a society in which exclusively human moral options are possible. For the first time, it is possible to account for meaning on entirely human terms, and psychology exploits this possibility by functioning as a religion founded on 'the self', rather than on an account of the divine. This difference between the divine foundation of what we commonly understand as 'religion', (i.e., Christianity, Islam, etc.) and the 'human' foundation of psychology leads Vitz to argue that psychology is inherently dangerous to religion, specifically Christianity. For Vitz, psychology functions as a religion of the self by promoting practices that support the idealization of the self, and these practices compete with the practices of other religions. Vitz writes that the religion of psychology is insidious because its reification of 'the self' is widely accepted in modern life, yet seldom reflected upon as a religion. Religious believers often participate in this religion of 'the self' without considering that the demands of pursuing 'the self' could conflict with their professed religion. He cites the harmful outcomes of psychology's emphasis on 'the self' that are contrary to the ideals of Christianity: rampant individuality, the breakdown of family unit and the idolization of 'the self'. He argues that the love of the self is inherently opposed to Christian love, which is at the centre of the Christian ideology. Vitz levels the moral critique at

psychology, that it poses a threat to the Christian faith, from his obviously Christian perspective. Indeed, Vitz argues that the solution to the numerous problems that arise as a consequence of 'selfism' is to 'escape from the self'. This resolution, he claims, is "religious, not psychological" (Vitz, 1977, 127).

In his account of the religious solution to the problem of psychology as a religion of 'the self', Vitz describes the development of 'the self' as a psychological object. The first stage of the self is the 'naïve self', where one's self is indistinguishable from the world, and is found in the experience of young children. As a child matures and begins to objectify the world, he begins to establish boundaries between himself and the world. This first stage is reminiscent of the 'porous self' described by Taylor, where one's self-understanding was necessarily also an understanding of the world in which one lived, a world imbued with meaning. The second stage of the self establishes 'the self' as a psychological construct. It is the 'selfist self', or the 'self as subject'. In this stage, the world is subjugated to the expansion of the control and power of the self. The self establishes the 'objectivity' of the world; thus stripping it of meaning, except that which finds its source in the human subject. This is the self of modernity, and recalls Taylor's 'buffered self', which encourages a scientific view of the external world, and an inner-directed view of selfhood. This stage naturally progresses to such a degree that the self-as-subject becomes increasingly isolated, both from the world and from communities of meaning. The 'self' falls victim to its own ruthless objectification of the world and others, resulting in the modern problems that we know by many names: alienation, loneliness, and the

existential ennui which stems from the realization that one's 'freedom' to objectify and control the world comes with the risk of meaninglessness and isolation. It is this stage where Vitz argues that psychology functions as a subversive and damaging religion. It provides a structure within which people can address questions of meaning, yet the answers it provides exacerbate the problems of individualism in modern life, which lead to the questions in the first place. Vitz calls the third stage, which is the religious resolution of these ills, the 'transcendent self'. In this stage, one's life is not directed towards one's 'self', but one's self is directed towards the service of God. That is, instead of serving as a moral ideal in itself, the self becomes meaningful once again in its relation to God. This third stage involves overcoming the psychological self.

E. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that psychology, as far as it is concerned with 'the self' or 'identity', is a secular expression of religious motives. It has built on the arguments of the previous chapters, that secular society allows for exclusively human moral options, and that both psychology and contemporary forms of religion are expressions of the focus on individuality in the modern social imaginary. Turning to Taylor's argument that identity has to do with the articulation of meaning, these previous arguments are bridged by showing that despite its claims to scientific status, psychology functions as a religion. By examining Dilthey's distinction between the human and the natural sciences, we can conclude that to model psychology after the natural sciences is to submit lived

experience to abstracted epistemological standards rather than to understand identity in a way that is true to lived experience. Vitz argues that because psychology functions as a religion, the problems that emerge from idealizing ‘the self’ can only have religious solutions. On the other hand, Dilthey is a proponent of establishing independent human sciences, of which psychology would be one. Psychology finds itself in conflict with formal religions because although it is a secular expression of the same motivation towards meaning that is found in other religions, it fails to avow this motivation and articulate its role in relation to it. The final chapter of this paper will explore the possibility that psychology may not necessarily conflict with religion. If psychology embraces its role as an authority on identity, in Taylor’s sense, it could establish itself as an effective human science that supports the understanding of human experience in a society that emphasizes individuality. If both psychology and religion express the modern emphasis on individuality, perhaps they can complement each other.

5. AUTHENTICITY

A. *Is there a future for psychology?*

Is the outlook for psychology as bleak as Vitz seems to suggest? Vitz argues that psychology is a ‘religion of the self’, and this is consistent with psychology taking the role of the ‘exclusively human’ moral option, that is according to Taylor, characteristic of secular society. In his book *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor echoes the problems of modernity that Vitz attributes to psychology. For Taylor, the malaise is also the result of a superficial individualism. Taylor is concerned that the individualism of modernity leads to a cheap moral relativism, a lack of engagement in the political sphere, and flattening of the experience of meaning which all stem from a self-absorbed emphasis on the ‘self’. In many ways, Taylor and Vitz agree. Yet having examined Taylor’s description of secular society as one in which a variety of ways to construe experience are possible, including exclusive humanism, should we follow Vitz to the conclusion that psychology is a threat to religion and to society, and that we should seek a Christian (or otherwise religious) resolution to the ills of modern, secular society?

Vitz argues that psychology and religion are antithetical, yet I will call upon Taylor’s work to argue that the outlook is not necessarily so bleak. The

strength of Vitz' argument regarding the future of psychology is not in the Christian critique that psychology is a threat to religion, but in the general critique that psychology functions as a religion, and that this leads to some damaging expressions of individuality. Even though Taylor examines some of the same problems, he argues that the modern emphasis on self-fulfillment is not an inherently impoverished moral position. Instead, the inarticulate versions of 'being true to oneself' that we encounter, and that both Vitz and Taylor criticize, are distortions of a nonetheless powerful moral ideal: *authenticity*. Chapter Two of this paper argued that the modern social imaginary, with its emphasis on the individual, makes psychology possible. As Taylor writes, this social imaginary shapes our experience of life in a very basic way, and it would therefore be a mistake to criticize psychology based on its individualistic tendencies too quickly. Taylor argues for a critical examination of individualism itself.

Vitz is not the only one who thinks that psychology and religion do not mix; the majority of psychologists would likely agree, albeit with the perspective that psychology should overcome religion rather than vice versa. Given the argument presented thus far, we can say that the root of any psychological hostility towards Christianity and religion in general, is hostility towards the religious nature of its own institutions and practices. Psychology cannot meaningfully exist outside of a culture whose form of life does not emphasize the individual nature of experience, yet psychology denies that it has roots in lived practice, purportedly to maintain 'scientific objectivity'. It is striking that psychologists are so concerned with the scientific status of the discipline, when

none of the members of the natural sciences are so concerned. This fixation belies a discomfort with the religious motivation towards meaning that provides psychology with its central concerns of ‘identity’ and ‘the self’.

What hope is there for psychology? If psychology is to be an authority on identity in modern, secular culture, it must affirm the nature of the task. Identity is about meaning, and psychology must develop a rich and well articulated perspective on identity, rather than taking an abstract stance that does not bear on people’s real experiences of meaning. As Taylor argues in *The Malaise of Modernity*, the superficial individuality that plagues both modern society and psychology can be enriched by re-affirming the ideal of which it is a shallow expression: *authenticity*. I will argue that secular society has room for both a psychology and religion that are distinct, yet complementary expressions of the motivation towards meaning as it is shaped by the modern emphasis on individuality: formal religion in terms of the authenticity of one’s faith, and psychology in terms of the authenticity of one’s identity, or ‘self’. Both emphasize the meaningfulness of individual experience, and embed that meaning in the articulation of the constitutive contexts in which one lives. In the following pages, I will outline a possible articulation of authenticity by which psychology can be a significant and vital part of modern life.

B. Authenticity

How can developing articulacy about authenticity enable psychology to be an authority on individual experience? In the following pages, I will make three

points outlining authenticity as a powerful moral ideal. The first will outline the importance of authenticity for identity and selfhood in the modern, secular world. The second will argue why the ideal of authenticity requires articulation. This point closely recalls the argument about articulation presented in the previous chapter. The third point is that articulation about authenticity supports human agency, which is a person's capacity to live a decisive and meaningful life. In conclusion I will argue that the role of psychology is to foster this articulation so that people can take responsibility for their lives, rather than be hindered by the problems of selfhood that bring people to seek psychological help.

a. Authenticity in society

Authenticity is a word that is we hear regularly. We often hear it used to describe a certain quality of 'realness' that is otherwise difficult to describe. This use of the word shows up in popular psychology, where people are trying to 'be authentic'; in religious circles, where there is widespread concern over the 'authenticity' of a church or its practices; and in the marketing world, where use of the word 'authentic' can translate into an easy sale of anything from condominiums to blue jeans. Most of these uses of authenticity count on the word itself to express a general sense of realness; very few of these uses give a precise articulation of authenticity. Taylor bemoans the inarticulate expression of this ideal, as it shows up in the cheap individuality that pervades our society. An example of superficial individuality is the consumerism of our society, where buying 'whatever makes me happy' appeals to a sense of fulfilling my 'self'

without any critical understanding of what my 'self' is, or how it is to be fulfilled. People often describe their fashion as a 'personal expression', drawing on the sense that whatever the 'real me' is, it is unique and individual. Yet this 'personal expression' in fashion is often not a mode that fosters rich self-understanding, and this is made obvious when mass-produced clothing is associated with individuality and expression.¹³ Another example is that almost any lifestyle or activity can be justified by claiming that it derives from being 'true to myself', even when it is harmful to society as a whole. Vitz (1977, 83) cites the increase in marriage breakdowns that are justified by this appeal to individual fulfillment, where the concerns of the individual take precedence over the value of the relationship in one's identity, the possibility that the individual may be at fault (rather than the other party or the institution of marriage itself), and the concerns of involved children.

If it is so damaging, why does this superficial notion of authenticity have so much currency in our society? It draws on the Romantic notion of the word, which sets one's inner life, passion, and desire up against the cold rationality of Enlightenment ideals. Our society has deep roots in *both* the rationality of the

¹³ Yet it is possible to put together a 'personal style' that is a rich articulation of one's identity, and really is 'one's own' while incorporating mass-produced clothing. Such a style may include clothes worn in a certain way, combined in a certain way, or worn in certain situations. Although this creativity and rich personal expression is possible, the point here is that people often fail to develop a real style of their own, yet are enticed by unarticulated, superficial notions of 'being an individual'.

Enlightenment and the expressivity of the Romantic reaction. Rationality shows up in the obsession with efficiency and progress that structures our work lives. We remember that ‘time is money’, and invest in communications technology that places us on-call at all times. As society becomes increasingly efficient and technological, people can feel isolated and replaceable, just a cog in the wheel of economy. As our world becomes increasingly rational and devoid of meaning, our Romantic response increases, and we become obsessed with ‘personal expression’ and ‘authenticity’ (Taylor, 1996,5). However, as long as our appeals to authenticity are appeals to our essential individuality, they go hand-in-hand with the problems they are intended to counteract. Shallow claims of personal expression and authenticity buy into the lie of our enlightened modernity that the individual is constitutively isolated from the world.

Authenticity has a central place in the way people understand themselves, yet its inarticulate use only perpetuates the problems of modernity that Vitz and Taylor point out. If psychology is to address problems of identity and selfhood, it must develop articulacy about authenticity. Psychology must develop the ideal of authenticity beyond its use as a justification for self-stultifying individuality, towards a tool with which a person can increase self-understanding and agency. Mobilizing authenticity as a richly-articulated moral ideal can allow people to reflect on their lives and say ‘I must do these things because they are commitments which make sense of who I am’, rather than allowing people to neglect self-reflection and justify any whim against any criticism by making the unassailable claim that ‘it’s a just *who I am*’.

b. The articulation of authenticity

How should we articulate authenticity? Authenticity is not a characteristic of one's self as *essentially* an individual. As Taylor has argued, experiencing life as individuals is rooted in the modern social imaginary. Any use of authenticity that relies on our essential individuality is a dead-end. Instead, a well-articulated use of authenticity would refer to the moral background by which my life as an individual is meaningful. This articulation of authenticity extends beyond my individuality and addresses the meaning of my experience in relation to its larger contexts of meaning. Therefore, authenticity must not rely on the definition of my identity as an individual, but on the articulation of how my individuality is meaningful according to the sources of meaning established within my community. Therefore, the question of how authenticity should be articulated must come from the way it is used as a source of meaning.

Authenticity shows up in people's lives as a concern with 'realness', and the desire to 'be true to oneself'. People are concerned with the *realness* of their faith, the love in their relationships, of their career commitments and all sorts of regular situations in life. It is in these situations of faith, family and career, and others that are commonly seen to 'give life meaning' in which any uncertainty about authenticity is of pressing concern. The popular understanding of 'crisis' involving these can be voiced as 'I don't know who you *really* are', 'I don't know if my faith is *real*', 'I don't know what I should be doing with my life', and can easily boil down to an identity crisis of 'I don't know who *I* am anymore'. Of

course, people often do not make the connection between a crisis of career or relationship and a crisis of identity, yet when we reflect on ‘who we are’, we quickly list things such as careers and relationships. These are crises of inarticulacy, where we are unable to say how these things ground our individual identities. Psychology is not much help at this point; in its efforts to give an epistemic definition to identity, it isolates identity from these constitutive contexts. People’s concern with the realness of those things that are commonly understood to give life meaning supports Taylor’s argument that authenticity functions as a moral ideal. The ideal of ‘realness’ provides a moral anchor in two main ways: that concern with the ‘realness’ of life is an attempt to address these questions as lived experience, of things of real concern, and that this concern with important things in life tends to affect one’s life as a *whole*.

i. Real Life

What counts as *real* for one experiencing a crisis in life, where one is questioning anything from faith to love? Perhaps obviously, one wants to live a *real life*, and for reassurance that their commitments reflect their ‘real life’. Rational argument cannot assure one of the realness of one’s love, for example. If someone is not feeling loved, no amount of argument or convincing can assure that person that love is still there. It is impossible to prove the realness of love. What is likely to happen if one party tries too hard to ‘prove’ their love is the opposite effect – that love is undermined. We all know that the demand to ‘Tell me you love me!’ only leads to more trouble. Instead of proving that love is real,

one can demonstrate it by renewing it; by doing the things that established love in the first place. Giving gifts, enacting rituals within the relationship and the like *show* love. The realness of the love in any relationship comes from the way it is lived out, and only if it is *demonstrated* can it be *known*. This theme, that knowledge depends on what we *do*, is the same as Taylor's argument that lived experience establishes the possibility of any kind of self-understanding or identity. These distinctly human concerns such as love and identity cannot be reduced to epistemological proofs or arguments. If what is *real* is what is lived out, then to articulate the authenticity of identity is to pay attention to the relation between one's identity and the way one lives. As Taylor writes, one's daily actions and commitments establish one's identity.

ii. Life as a Whole

The second aspect of satisfying these concerns is the 'entire life' dimension of authenticity. Questions of 'realness' tend to concern those central things in life which anchor a person's sense of meaning. People are concerned with the things that make their lives significant. For example, people are not concerned with the authenticity of their preferences for a certain colour or a certain breakfast cereal – things that do not affect any other aspects of one's life – but of things like faith, career and relationships, because the significance of one's life *as a whole* depends on these things. Taylor's differentiation between strong and weak evaluations has to do with this idea that there are central features of life according to which we understand ourselves and articulate an identity. Inherent

in this process of evaluation is that we make all strong evaluations against a background of significance – a background, established over time and in community, over which one does not have complete control at any given time. Thus, even the strongest evaluator has aspects of life that are left implicit, and not articulated as a strong evaluation. A strong evaluator still lives a *whole* life, replete with simple desire and emotional affect, and not just a particular set of strongly evaluated commitments. These areas of simple desire in a strong evaluator's life are those areas in which he can make any decision (say, between hobbies) without implicating his life as a whole (say, his career or family life). Questions of authenticity arise in those situations wherein if *this* aspect of my life is not genuine, then the *whole* is implicated. For example, a crisis of faith has an 'entire life' dimension: 'if my faith isn't genuine, then I must also look at the way I conduct my business, my relationships, my finance, my political identity and so on. When questioning a major source of meaning in one's life, everything is affected! This shows up in the way that crises of sources of meaning can also be a full blown identity crisis, where questioning one's relationships leads to the question 'who *am* I?' Alternately, one of these crises can flatten one's experience of meaning in one's whole life. This is the sense reflected in the experience of meaninglessness that is central to the existential tradition. Conversely, one is assured of the 'realness' or authenticity of one's faith, career, or relationships when it is clear these are consistent with one's life *as a whole*. When one's significant pursuits in life complement each other to form a coherent whole, a general sense of harmony can replace questions of authenticity.

It can be difficult to approach authenticity on this ‘entire life’ dimension, partly because when one experiences a crisis of meaning, it often focuses on a specific source of meaning in life, such as a relationship or a career. Instead of approaching the question of authenticity in terms of the authenticity of one’s *whole* life, we often question the authenticity of a specific part. An example of this kind of situation, where psychology in fact can perform a disservice, is in a case like career counseling. A recent high school graduate who has embarked on a certain career is beset with the question ‘am I in the right career?’ and goes to see a career counselor who has all the latest psychological inventories. After sharing that he isn’t sure if his career is the right one for him, the psychologist administers a set of measures of his ‘aptitudes’, and a personality inventory. As it turns out, the psychologist reports that this person has all the right aptitudes and personality traits to succeed in a particular career and offers some ideas for making work more enjoyable. In this scenario, the psychologist could very well be offering sound advice to this person, yet by addressing the question of authenticity (‘should I *really* be doing this?’) in terms of its specific direction, rather than in terms of that person’s whole life, the psychologist can easily miss the point. A person may be very good at a specific career, but that career could still conflict with the way one understands oneself and the values by which one’s life is meaningful. For example, one might be skilled in rhetoric and urged to a career in the law, but finds that the long hours and inherent competitiveness do not fit with the sense of duty and cooperativeness that one values in one’s family life. While these questions of authenticity are often directed towards a specific

aspect of one's life, they implicate one's entire life. As argued above, these questions do not arise in situations that do not involve the whole of one's life, but in relation to those things by which our lives are meaningful. Therefore the authenticity of one's career, relationships, faith and the like should be addressed as they stand in relation to the *whole* of one's life. Authenticity is not a property of specific aspects of one's life, but is the ideal by which one seeks to integrate one's life into a coherent whole.

iii. Authenticity and Community

People are constituted as 'selves' by their own self-understanding. One major direction of Taylor's argument is that if our self-understanding makes us 'who we are', then one's articulation of one's self understanding is central to *being* oneself. The opening up of individual experience as meaningful is one of the great developments of modernity. Where the meaning of experience was previously located in the world as well as in oneself, modernity allows a degree of freedom in the individual search for meaning. This is clearly reflected in the contemporary obsession with 'being oneself'. Yet even this degree of individual freedom is rooted in a *social* imaginary out of which the possibility of individually meaningful experience rises. That is, to paraphrase Taylor, 'we learn *in community* what it means to be an *individual*' (Taylor, 2007, 157). So to articulate one's life in terms of authenticity is not to hold up one's life to a standard which one finds 'within' oneself, as if each person is a lonely individual who tries to make up meaning on his own. Instead, to ask 'am I being myself?'

requires an articulation of how one's individuality is constituted within a background of significance that one establishes not in isolation, but in community. Therefore, to articulate one's authenticity requires one to look 'outside' of oneself, at the moral background over which one never has complete control.

iv. Authenticity as a non-finalizable task

The articulation of authenticity is a non-finalizable task, as is any moral ideal, as one necessarily never has complete control over it. One does not 'achieve' authenticity once for all time. The articulation of one's identity in relation to authenticity is a continuing task; as one articulates one's own life in terms of authenticity, the ideal of authenticity itself is further articulated. As argued in the previous chapter, the moral background of significance, according to which we can articulate an identity is itself constituted by the history of a community structuring their lives according to it. An example using another moral ideal could be one's commitment to justice. We cannot say that one has fully achieved justice in one's life – only that one is committed to working towards justice. Why not? Justice is a meaningful ideal within a community whose actions and articulations of it continually shape what is meant by 'justice'.

An articulate approach to authenticity is one that examines the relation between one's life and one's experience of the world. Thus as one articulates one's life, both one's identity and one's experience of the world are shaped. Furthermore, because the meaningfulness of the world is constituted in

community, it is subject to forces outside one's personal agency. The sum of all these factors means that one can never articulate a 'final' version of one's authenticity. One's identity is the articulation of the relation between oneself and a moral background over which one does not have complete control.

c. Articulation and agency

The outcome of developing an articulatory about authenticity is that it supports one's agency. Taylor has described human beings as those who are capable of self-reflection; who care about 'who they are'. Self-reflection proceeds through the articulation of one's relation to a moral background, and articulating one's life in terms of the ideal of authenticity allows modern, secular people to anchor their individuality and take responsibility for their lives. The purpose of this section is to outline how one's moral articulatory increases one's agency. The previous chapter discussed Taylor's argument that agency has to do with one's ability to articulate the choices and actions one makes in terms of some kind of moral ideal, so that one's identity is constituted by one's self-understanding. How does one's moral articulatory support agency? Articulatory allows a person to distinguish between what is part of 'me' (for which I can take responsibility) and what is part of the 'world'. With a rich self-understanding, I can confidently avow my responses to the world *as mine*, and knowing what makes me 'me', I can take positive action in working towards the person I want to be. Moral articulatory allows one to shape one's own identity by committing to

certain possible ways of living that are significant according to the moral background of one's community.

Articulating what is 'me' and what is 'not me', is the first step in carving out one's identity, as we saw in Dilthey's argument. While this distinction between 'self' and 'other' gives a rudimentary account of how identity is established, it can be extended to support an account of agency. The first example is of an infant learning the physical boundaries of its body, and from there distinguishing between what is 'in me' and what is 'outside of me'. If we take this example seriously, we see that this distinction of one's own physical body is obvious only in hindsight. At the time, all the infant has is undifferentiated experience. Extending this towards adulthood, there are times when we lose control of ourselves. We find ourselves doing things that 'aren't me', or are beset with strong emotions that seem to just happen *to us*, originating outside of our own will. Emotions provide the best example. If we are inarticulate about our emotions, we experience them in an undifferentiated way. Sadness is just sadness and we feel no difference between disappointment and frustration, for example. We feel in emotional generalities, and lack full ownership of them; to a degree, they just 'happen'. An unarticulated outburst of anger can spring out of a person, who then may say that 'it just happened to me', it was 'not my fault', or 'you made me feel this'. In this kind of scenario, inarticulacy results in an inability to moderate, understand or take responsibility for one's own emotions. One ends up blaming anyone but oneself. On the other hand, one can articulate an emotional experience according to what belongs to me and what is out of my control.

Emotional responsibility becomes possible when one realizes that another person cannot *make* one have this or that emotion. Recognizing that an emotion is an affective response to one's relation to the world, one can justify an emotion such as anger according to things in the world that conflict with one's values or ideals. The result is that one can reflect on one's emotions, take responsibility for them, and shape them through further articulation, while admitting that sometimes the external world is out of one's control.

C. *The Role of Psychology*

In conclusion, the role of psychology is to cultivate an articulacy about authenticity in our modern, secular society. If it is to be an authority on self-hood and identity, psychology needs to recognize that these issues have to do with a motivation towards *meaning*. While psychology has traditionally been about the individual, psychologists must remember that people are nonetheless embedded in social, cultural, historical and physical contexts. To isolate the individual from these contexts, which provide sources of meaning in life, undercuts the viability of psychology. Psychology itself becomes possible according to a specific way of understanding lived experience that we have developed as a society; namely, that we experience life as individuals. To remain true to the conditions of its development and the nature of its focus of study, psychology must help people become articulate about their own identity as it stands in relation to the ideal of authenticity in modern, secular society. While this means we must give up the radically self-sufficient version of individuality that we have become accustomed

to, by realizing that we do not have total control over the ideal of authenticity or over any of the contexts in which we have our identities, we will enrich, deepen and take fuller responsibility for our individual lived experience.

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