

Culture, Moral Topographies, and Interactive Personhood

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Abstract

This article draws on hermeneutics and interactivism to challenge the prevailing dichotomization of culture/self and fact/value by proposing a theoretical perspective that culture provides a moral framework in which people are embedded and that cultural values and assumptions are distributed across different levels of knowing. I then address the problems of relativism raised by the claim that cultures are different moral topographies, and consider how hermeneutic dialogue is a way of working towards “truth without certainty.” I conclude by suggesting that mindfulness and contemplative practices offer tangible ways of fostering the openness required for hermeneutic dialogue and cultural learning.

One impediment for the field of psychology in grappling with the significance of culture continues to be its underlying dualistic worldview that is arguably based on Newtonian and Cartesian presuppositions. Hermeneutic theorists argue that Western psychology’s emphasis upon objectivity and neutrality, and its aspiration to be culture-free, ahistorical, and universal, insulate the field from recognizing the pervasive influence of individualistic cultural values and assumptions. These individualistic presuppositions obscure a more fundamental level of agency and experience that precedes the division of the world into dichotomies of self/other, subject/object, culture/self, fact/value, and mind/body. Martin Heidegger’s (1962) phenomenological insight that our lives are “structures of care,” combined with Charles Taylor’s (1988) view that we exist in “moral topographies,” challenge the dichotomization of both culture/self and of fact/values and provide resources for developing an account of how culture is a moral framework in which people are embedded.

In recent years cultural psychologists such as Markus & Kitayama (1991) have drawn on Taylor’s (1989) acclaimed *Sources of the Self* in marshalling evidence of Western and non-Western cultural differences. Cultural psychologists have not, however, attended to Taylor’s basic ontological vision. In this paper I explore some of the implications of

the hermeneutic perspective of Taylor and Heidegger for thinking about culture. While it may be that their contributions have been overlooked because neither author uses the term “culture” in their writings, I will indicate their relevance for cultural theorizing, and how, despite rarely using the term or setting out to offer a theory of culture, both hermeneutics theorists provide penetrating insights that can help us avoid the tendency to reify and objectify culture and its relationship to the person.

Perhaps the most important statement of Taylor’s intuitions about the relationship of culture and personhood is found in a chapter entitled, “The Moral Topography of the Self.” In this chapter Taylor (1988) sketches out the claim that “Our description of ourselves is inseparable from our existing in a space of moral aspiration and assessment” (p. 298). I will primarily focus on Taylor in this article, but also integrate Mark Bickhard’s (1980, 1999, 2004; Bickhard & Christopher, 1994; Campbell & Bickhard, 1986) interactivism. Interactivism and its notion of the *Knowing Levels* provide a process model in which agency as well as cultural values and assumptions are distributed across different levels of awareness.

The recognition of cultural differences in understanding the nature of the self and the self’s moral sources raises questions of cultural relativity. Hermeneutic dialogue is often presented as a means of moving beyond objectivism and relativism by working towards “truth without certainty.” I will suggest how the stance of openness, described by Gadamer (1975) as a prerequisite to hermeneutic dialogue, might best be thought of as a kind of spiritual discipline. I conclude by suggesting that mindfulness and contemplative practices offer tangible ways of helping to foster the openness necessary for hermeneutic dialogue and cultural learning.

Taylor’s Reintegration of Culture, Values and the Self

Taylor (1988) begins his essay claiming, “Being a self is existing in a space of issues, to do with how one ought to be, or how one measures up against what is good, what is right, what is really worth doing” (p. 298). For Taylor, this is a transcendental claim true of all people. In this way Taylor follows a path laid out by Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Geertz (1973, 1983) strongly rejects the claim of any kind of specific human universals, but he does posit a transcendental existential condition. Like Berger and Luckmann (1966), Geertz sees this core condition as our need for structures of meaning in our lives to deal with our plasticity and the ever-lurking threat of chaos. Above all, for Geertz (1973) we are “meaning-seeking” animals; he contends “the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence” (p. 434). We have a “pervasive orientational necessity” for meaning, and it is culture, with its two ele-

ments of worldview and ethos, that provides this meaning (p. 363). Taylor (1988) is also concerned with orientational frameworks and believes that a “constant is to be found in the shape of the questions that all cultures must address” (p. 299). Taylor’s focus, however, is narrower than Geertz’s in that he is particularly concerned with the nature of the self and our self-interpretations. It should be noted that Taylor generally uses the terms self, selfhood, person, personhood, identity, and subject interchangeably, which, as Abbey (2000) points out, can be frustrating to more analytical readers.

In his chapter on the moral topography of the self, Taylor (1988) emphasizes how the moral dimension in life is inescapable by drawing on a spatial metaphor and suggesting we live in a moral topography or grid. The coordinates or dimensions of the grid are formed by our moral sources, those characteristics of life that we strive towards. We see this metaphor as helping to elaborate, at least in part, what Heidegger (1962) meant when he declared that our lives are “structures of care.”

It is critical from the outset to clarify that Taylor (1989) believes that our tendency in Western culture and philosophy to equate the moral with issues of justice and behavior that is solely other regarding is too narrow (see also Campbell & Christopher, 1996; Campbell, Christopher, & Bickhard, 2002; Walker & Hennig, 2004; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Instead he contends that other issues such as “our sense of what underlies our own dignity, or questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling” are central to a deeper understanding of moral. Thus, Taylor, like Crane Brinton (1987), uses moral to refer to our deepest sense of what life is about—our deepest understanding of what is good, worthy, and desirable. Elsewhere Taylor (1989) refers to *moral sources* as a particular culture’s understanding of what constitutes the good life and the good person. Responsibility, for instance, is an important American moral source and, along with its antonyms like irresponsibility or laziness, helps to stake out coordinates by which we know and assess ourselves. When Taylor uses “good” it is not in a religious sense as in being saintly or closer to God, although these are not ruled out. Instead, he means good in terms of what is seen as ideal, desirable, worthy of pursuing, worthy of emulating, leading to success. Each culture, subculture, and individual has moral sources that operate either explicitly or, more commonly, implicitly to remind us what we *should* be or become.

Some will object that this view of moral is far too broad. Taylor, however, is in a camp along with a growing number of other contemporary thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Robert Bellah (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, 1991), and William Sullivan (1986) (not to mention countless “premodern” thinkers) who maintain that “the moral in our human situation is not to be separated

from the rest of our universe” (Brinton, 1987, pp. 5-6). These theorists see the moral and ethical dimension of life as so intertwined and interdependent with other aspects of human life that it makes no sense to try to separate them into distinct domains. Describing how the moral *is* seamlessly integrated into virtually all aspects of life, Brinton (1987) claims that even thinking of the moral dimension as a strand or thread within the fabric of life minimizes the significance and pervasiveness of the moral. Instead, he suggests that “the moral is simply an ingredient in a mixture, a dish, in which the ingredients as we experience them are inextricably melted or mingled, not to be separated in this real world, but only in the unreal world of analysis” (pp. 5-6).

Taylor, Sullivan, Bellah, and others argue that this attempt of ours to form separate domains for the moral and non-moral is not only futile but that it has been destructive and distorts our approach to life. Indeed, this dualistic attempt is a peculiarly Western phenomena and that dates back to the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For most cultures, and even our own until recently, the natural order is also a moral order (Berger, 1977, 1979). And part of the brilliance of Taylor’s larger body of work is to remind Western peoples that, despite pretensions otherwise, we still live within moral frameworks. While Taylor explicitly draws on spatial metaphors he claims these are not “fanciful or arbitrary” but are instead “anchored in moral consciousness itself” (p. 300). To deepen our intuition of what moral sources are, Taylor uses a *via negativa* and notes that we all have a sense of what it means to be spiritually “out-of-joint”:

This is conceptually expressed in a host of ways: as being lost, or condemned, or exiled, or unintegrated, or without meaning, or insubstantial, or empty, to name some categories. Corresponding to each of these descriptions of breakdown is some notion of what it would be to overcome it, to have integration, or full being, to be justified, or found, or whatever. But more, there is a notion of ‘where’ this integration, fullness, etc., might come from, what might bring it about. . . . In other words, these different, often indefinite and tentative senses of what integration consists of incorporate notions of where it might be found, in the sense of where the strength lies, where the sources or resources are situated, which could bring integration, or fullness about. (1988, pp. 300-301)

These moral sources inform us of how we are doing in life, where we are, how we are “measuring up,” how far along the road we have gone, and in what direction the road heads. While Taylor does not fully develop this point, a moral topography helps us to see the other side of human nature; it helps to determine and define what we see as bad,

evil, unhealthy, unvirtuous, immature, or even pathological in human affairs. A moral topography thus defines our sense of who we should and should not be or become and in this way is an element of what Geertz (1973) called *ethos*. Importantly, for Taylor questions about the good or ideal existence are not the special province of the philosopher. Each of us has already implicitly answered these questions and continue to do so in the way our lives are structured (cf. Smith, Türk Smith & Christopher, 2007). And they determine our gut-level sense of how we are doing and what it is that we need to be doing.

A moral topography also corresponds to the *world view* element in Geertz's definition of culture by defining our sense of who we *are*. This occurs in two ways as a moral topography implicates an ontology of the self or personhood as well as defining the parameters of identity. As Taylor writes:

An understanding of moral sources involves a corresponding conception of what in us, what faculties, or levels, or aspects of our being, connects us to these sources—as reason (understood substantively, i.e., as vision of rational order) does to the Ideas, or reasoning (understood formally, i.e., as thinking according to rational cannons and procedures) does to the austere naturalist's acceptance of finitude, or our uncorrupted first impulses do to the voice of nature, or the will does in turning us to or away from God, and so on. (1988, p. 302)

A moral topography thus can specify how the “pie” of the person is divided up—how different societies think about what the core components or elements of the person are. Western society tends to assume the universality of the tripartite model of behavior, emotions, cognition. The Balinese, however, believe that each of us has four siblings that exist on the hidden realm of *niskala*.

Moral topographies also define our identity—aspects of ourselves and our social environments with which we identify. The boundaries of person, where the self is thought to begin and end, vary across cultures. Noting that while people, in general, have a sense of themselves as physically distinct from others and have “some sense of an inner, private self,” Markus and Kitayama (1991) underscore the degree to which both the inner and outer self show a remarkable amount of cultural diversity (pp. 6-7). In the extreme case they maintain that

the *individual*, in the sense of a set of significant inner attributes of the person, may cease to be the primary unit of consciousness. Instead, the sense of belongingness to a social relation may become so strong that it makes better sense to think of the relation as the functional unit of conscious reflection. (p. 7)

Taylor (1985b) observes that historically the focus of identity in the Western world has been one's location within socio-cultural matrices but that with modernity we have come to identify with our inner life.

As Taylor sees it a moral topography thus serves two important functions. First, it provides a language for making distinctions (such as body/soul, reason/desire, will/knowledge, deep natural impulse/superficial imposed response) about what is most essential and worthy about the person. Second, the distinctions created by the moral topography form a context in which we can articulate what we are and whether, for some cultures and times, we even think of ourselves as "selves" at all. In other words, a moral topography addresses these two core questions about what a person is and what a person should be or become.

Different cultures provide different moral topographies. For instance, the good or ideal person in traditional Confucian China was first and foremost characterized by filial piety, being a dutiful son or daughter. In contrast, American culture praises such attributes as authenticity and autonomy. Such characteristics or attributes, as well as their opposites such as selfishness in the case of China and inauthenticity and dependency in America, form the coordinates of a grid within which we orient and evaluate ourselves. Notably, Western individualism might be thought of as the first moral vision that has been in denial of its own moral roots. Individualism tends to portray itself, in juxtaposition with the Medieval vision from which it rose in opposition, as based on a non-theological, rational, and psychologically realistic account of human nature. In contrast with the individualist moral topology, perhaps all other moral topographies *explicitly* embrace the moral and spiritual dimensions and see their outlook as part of or informed by a cosmology. Throughout his career, Taylor has challenged the supposed objectivity and neutrality of individualism, showing it relies upon and advocates a particular moral topography. Thus, while the coordinates of the grid, the moral sources, vary across cultures, all people live within some moral topography. The inescapability of moral visions is perhaps most powerfully indicated the critiques of the social sciences by Taylor and others that demonstrate how moral commitments are implicit in even the most careful attempts to be objective and value-free (e.g., Miller, 2005; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Taylor, 1985a, 1985b).

One of the implications of what Taylor, and before him Heidegger, is saying is that cultural values and morals are not 'things' that the self has or standards the self attempts to manage, coordinate and apply. They are not qualities that the self attempts to embody or instantiate. "We do not," Heidegger writes, "throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it" (p. 190). Instead, human beings are a configuration of values. People *are* "just the stands they take in living out their lives" (Guignon & Per-

eboom, 1995, p. 189). Self and cultural values are not two separate entities that then have to be re-related to each other. Self and values are instead different perspectives on the same underlying dynamic process.

At any given moment we are doing one thing rather than another. What we end up doing and not doing is what we value. When we begin to view the person over a longer period of time we have sequences of values being enacted. What behaviors we select, what emotions we experience, and what thoughts we entertain are all manifestations of values. Implicit in everything we do and experience is an entire worldview and ethos. Or in Adler's terms we might say there is a lifestyle consisting of assumptions about the self, others, and world that is implicit in each moment of human functioning (Christopher & Bickhard, 1992). When culture is defined as "webs of significance" as Geertz (1973) does, that have both cognitive, ontological assumptions (world view) and aesthetic, ethical, moral assumptions (ethos), then each moment of our functioning is also an expression of culture. In this way we are, moment by moment, expressing variations of cultural themes and patterns. In Taylor's terms, we are expressing different cultural moral sources. Consequently, there is no clear divide that separates culture and the self.

The attempt here is to get away from our dualistic preconceptions about such things as persons, selves, values, culture and so on. Our culture has bifurcated and reified these phenomena into 'things.' The history of psychology, in keeping with the dualistic and reductionistic tendencies of Western culture, can be partly told as the effort to take such phenomena and turn them into variables that can be inserted into linear equations. Mainstream psychology often expresses ideas in 'boxologies;' we think in terms of the kinds of boxes that fit neatly into path analyses. The only uncertainty about capturing reality through these boxes and paths is expressed too often solely in terms of statistical probability—the uncertainty is about the strength of the connections, not the underlying approach. Fortunately, scores of cultural psychologists have questioned approaching culture and these related concepts in this way, arguing that they cannot be treated as simply another independent variable or box in the equation (Adams & Markus, 2001; Cole, 1996; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Kashima, 2000; Shweder, 1991; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1990).

The alternative is to return to *personhood as a process*. According to Hull (1974) every science has gone through a stage in which the phenomena of study has been seen as some sort of substance or structures of substance. In many of the natural sciences these early ontologies (like phlogiston theories of fire and fluid theories of magnetism) have been replaced by process models in which phenomena are modeled as

processes or as patterns and organization of processes. Psychology seems largely to be trapped at the structure stage of scientific development. In his last unfinished work, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, William James stated, "There must always be a discrepancy between concepts and reality, because the former are static and discontinuous while the latter is dynamic and flowing" (quoted in Pirsig, 1991, p. 365).

To move forward we need to re-envision personhood as a process and move away from the sterile reified notions of culture and self that have distorted psychological theory and research (Bickhard & Christopher, 1994). This means looking afresh at our most basic ways of *interacting* in the world. For instance, Robert Pirsig (1991) in attempting to rethink human and natural existence in process terms through a metaphysics of *Quality*, contends that *quality* comes first. It is what drives or informs substance and structure. The bad news is that the discipline of psychology, modeling itself on the natural sciences, has few internal resources to think critically about its underlying conceptual assumptions (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). The good news is that in some of the intellectual traditions like pragmatism, hermeneutics, and interactivism that have been historically marginalized, there are powerful tools and resources, as many of the contributions to this journal over the years attest.

Moral All The Way Down: Interactivism and The Knowing Levels

For some analytically minded philosophers and psychologists, Taylor's writings lack conceptual precision. In part, these criticisms are due to Taylor's lack of interest in forming a system or in generating precise definitions of the self, the person, personhood, and identity (Abbey, 2000). It seems to us that Taylor's lack of precision leads to misinterpretations of his theory with regard to the level of being that he is addressing. For instance, some like Smith (2002) are not quite sure how to reconcile where moral sources "reside"—in practices, in bodies, or in minds. Others like Flanagan (1990) have accused Taylor of being overly cognitive and intellectualizing.

I believe that a useful way to navigate through the morass of conflicting definitions and interpretations of the self and identity, and the confusion around where culture and values reside, is by turning to *interactivism*, a process-oriented nondualistic ontology of personhood. Interactivism and its notion of the *Knowing Levels* provide a process model of personhood that helps to clarify and theoretically situate the level of being at which moral sources and culture exist. In this way it helps to deepen our understanding about the relationship between culture and the person by viewing the ontology of personhood in terms of moral process.

Interactivism is “an approach to all of psychology” that is based upon a “commitment to a psychological ontology of abstract process and process emergents” (Campbell & Bickhard, 1986, p. 34). As a model of development, interactivism relies upon a hierarchy of *knowing levels* that is based upon an interactive model of knowing (Bickhard, 1980). At the first knowing level, infants and young children interact with the world and learn from their interactions. However, infants and children (up to age four) do not really “know” what they “know” and learn. In other words, their learning and their knowledge is in its most fundamental way what might be called procedural, procedures of how to do or accomplish various things. What the child learns is functional patterns of interaction. These patterns of interaction presuppose certain things about the self, others, and the world. At Knowing Level 1, the child does not have cognitive access to these presuppositions. Reflexive consciousness about the self has not developed and so the self is implicit. Nevertheless, Knowing Level 1 provides for very sophisticated learning and nuanced understandings of the physical and social world resulting in the ability of the person at this level to adopt and take over many social practices and the cultural values and assumptions implicit within them (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007)

With maturation, human beings develop the capacity for higher knowing levels, as a result of developing *reflective abstraction*, the process Piaget (Campbell, 2001) thought was necessary for cognitive stage transitions. Through reflective abstraction, what was ground becomes object; values for instance can become explicit and consciously recognized instead of just implicit. At the higher knowing levels, values can be organized into philosophies. Interactivism posits a series of Knowing Levels based on the process of reflective abstraction. At Knowing Level 2 we can begin to reflect upon and form abstractions regarding what was implicit at Knowing Level 1. For instance, explicit moral goals like being a good boy or girl can guide behavioral and emotional choices. Taking this example further, at Knowing Level 3 we can begin to integrate all of the ways of being good to form a sense of identity. At a possible Level 4 we might compare this form of identity to other possible identity structures. Unlike most stage models, the Knowing Levels are not fixed stages that are attained once and for all. Instead, they are a cognitive capacity that may or may not be exercised at any given moment. Knowing Level 1 is always operating; higher levels of knowing may or may not be in operation. Interactivism maintains that there are potentially an infinite number of knowing levels and that we can also form knowing levels orthogonal to the first series as when we engage in metacognition.

One of the consequences of this model is that agency is in a sense distributed across the knowing levels. We *are* the cultural values and

assumptions that we live out unreflexively in the kinds of behavioral choices we make and emotional reactions we have in an ongoing way. The self or the person *is* an engaged and embodied agent immersed in social practices such that Heidegger (1962) can state “Proximally Dasein is ‘they’, and for the most part it remains so” (p. 167). However, we are also the *cogito*, the more self-consciously aware, reflexive agents that are able to form conscious choices, values, and interpretations. Like Descartes we tend to identify with a thinking subject. But the consequence as Heidegger (1962) observed is that “That which is ontically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all; and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked” (p. 69). The error is believing that this situation calls for an either/or solution. Interactivism posits instead a developmental solution based on the emergence of different levels of awareness out of a continuous and ever-present Knowing Level 1.

I maintain that Taylor’s moral sources and moral topography operate at all the knowing levels. In other words, culture exists at all the knowing levels. There are moral sources and a moral topography implicit in the learned patterns of interaction at Knowing Level 1. At this level, the moral sources are implicit and pertain not just to the person but to the social practices, institutions, and even artifacts and technology with which the person is engaged. Cultural values and assumptions at this level resist the kind of easy categorization as being internal or external. With cognitive development we can begin to consciously articulate and espouse these moral sources and topographies. It is critical to note that these more conscious articulations may or may not accurately capture the values and assumptions operating at Knowing Level 1—as with hermeneutics, we will never be able to fully know ourselves. Moreover, the moral sources at these different levels need not be consistent or harmonious. There is plenty of room within and across the Knowing Levels for the kinds of ambiguity, ambivalence and conflict that both social-personality researchers (e.g., Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999) and psychodynamic theorists (Hillman, 1975; Sullivan, 1953) see as central—there is no need for the self to be a monolithic, internally consistent entity. Indeed, in interactivism the person *is* the valuing process, the working out of these moral sources and the ongoing interaction of values and assumptions implicit at one level operating on those at other levels.

Implications of An Interactive Ontology of Taylor’s Cultural Vision

A hermeneutic-interactivist perspective that attempts to lay out a moral ontology of culture has many implications, but in this space we can only sketch out a few of them. There are many notions within psychological theory, research, and practice that are arguably based on

reifications of process. At the individual level, a good amount of psychological theorizing has been based on ontologies that can be remodeled in terms of moral process. The notion of defenses that is central to much of clinical theory and practice might, for instance, be fruitfully seen as conflicts between different moral sources at different levels of knowing. For instance, it seems all too human to derive pleasure from hurting those who have hurt us. Typically, we defend ourselves against such a realization because it conflicts with many moral and religious traditions and our own self-representations of how we want to be and be seen. Instead of seeing this as a conflict between impulses or desires on the one side, and the ego or some more rational part of ourselves on the other, we might instead see it as a conflict of values—the value of getting even, establishing retribution, enacting a primitive kind of justice at variance with the value of forgiveness, turning the other cheek, equanimity, being seen by oneself and one's community as being mature or moral, and so forth. Similarly, the notion of will power, which influences both counseling practice and popular psychology alike, is a reification of moral process. Moreover, as a concept will power seems largely unhelpful as, in spite of the customary exhortations to use more will power, no one seems to have figured out a method for cultivating the will; consequently the fortunate end up being those who constitutionally have more of it, the unlucky being those who do not have enough (and now on top of their initial shortcoming they have an additional reason to castigate themselves). Instead, what might look externally like will power might be thought of as the prioritizing of moral sources such that certain consciously adopted moral sources or strong evaluations have become more important or significant to the person than the moral sources that are or were implicit in those aspects of themselves they are attempting to govern in a particular way. This process can entail, and in therapy often requires, making explicit those moral sources that are implicit in the undesirable behaviors, emotions, or thoughts. In a similar way, theories of motivation commonly treat motivation as a kind of force, power, or energy that moves the substance of the person or the person's psychological components. We believe instead that motivation might be better regarded as the selecting or prioritizing of one course of interaction over others and that moral sources are implicit in these selections (see Bickhard, 2000).

Another implication of this perspective is that it helps to situate the interpretive, dialogical, and narrative turns within psychology. It can be tempting to approach these theories in overly cognitive or intellectualizing ways that reinforce an individualistic and Cartesian sense of self who creates narratives and forms interpretations. Much of what gets discussed in these approaches is psychological phenomena at Knowing Level 2 or higher. It is clearly possible for us to become

aware of our narratives, our interpretations, and the polyphony of inner voices at higher knowing levels. But this level is not foundational. What is often missed is that many of our self-interpretations and narratives are embodied and lived out in social practices or interactions at Knowing Level 1 and never become consciously known. The Knowing Levels can thus help us to differentiate between self-interpretations and narratives that are implicit and explicit and consider the relationships between them. But whether implicit or explicit, the resources for self-interpretation and narrative come from our cultural traditions; we take over and possibly creatively reinterpret or combine in novel ways the moral sources that are already laid out in advance for us. "The self-interpretations which define," the individual, Taylor observes, are "drawn from the interchange which the community carries on" (1985a, p. 8).

One way of thinking about this is Taylor's notion of the dialogical self. Taylor (1985c) sharply criticizes the traditional modern Western assumption that monological thought by the self precedes conversation and dialogue. In keeping with more contemporary understandings of human development (e.g., Shweder et al., 1990; Siegel, 1999), Taylor claims that it is interaction, symbolized as dialogue and conversation, that in a sense precedes the development of the person. "I become a person and remain one only as an interlocutor" (Taylor, 1985c, p. 276). While agreeing with Taylor's critique and his dialogical alternative, I would add that developmentally prior to becoming an interlocutor we learn nonverbal interactions and ways of being-in-the-world that are culturally laden. A child for instance senses parents' emotional reactions and develops characteristic ways of responding before developing language comprehension.

Another implication of regarding culture as a moral framework is that it potentially recasts how we think about differences between and within groups. Understanding different cultural groups necessitates understanding their deepest motivations. Arguably, variations in understandings of personhood and of what it means to be a good person and live the good life underlie all cultural differences. Such a statement is more obvious in considering differences between, for example, fundamentalist Islamic nations and liberal Western ones. But also within any particular culture the moral sources that form a moral topography do not always neatly fit together and form one larger common goal or picture of the good life. For example, as Taylor (1975, 1985b) as well as Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) have observed, Western culture's dual emphasis upon utilitarian and expressivist orientations toward life form an uneasy alliance. If we consider some of the raging debates around divisive social issues in the United States such as abortion or gay rights, some clarity emerges when seeing that what is at stake are two competing yet related moral

visions. For instance, the abortion debate ensnares two different interpretations of when personhood originates, at conception or at birth, and pits two different moral sources against each other: freedom of choice and the sanctity of life. Both moral sources are central to our individualistic heritage and the formation of current Western and particularly American culture (Lukes, 1973; Taylor, 1989). It is therefore not surprising most Americans feel caught in the middle, able to hear the merit in both positions, responding almost viscerally to the moral claims that each position draws upon.

If moral visions are inescapable, then it is incumbent upon us to discern what these are even in the midst of behaviors and outlooks that appear unethical or immoral. Elsewhere we have explored how even such apparently antisocial activities as gang behavior and sociopathy rest on moral visions (Christopher, 1996; Schmitz & Christopher, 1997). Failing to acknowledge these moral sources can mean that we cast those individuals involved in such activities outside of the moral circle or human sphere. Instead, when we work to discern the moral visions that *are* operating, it provides a bridge that can permit dialogue about how these moral visions are being interpreted and applied and to what extent they are being expressed in ways that are in conflict with other moral sources.

From this moral perspective on culture, cultural variations might be considered to be primarily due to two factors: interpretation and valuation. People live on the basis of a variety of interpretations about both the nature of the self or personhood and about moral sources and the situations in which they should be applied. Human beings also differ in how they prioritize one moral source over another. Programs such as positive psychology and character education which emphasize the universality of virtues often fail to give full acknowledgement to the ways these virtues are both interpreted differently and ranked differently across cultures and across time (Christopher & Hickinbottom, in press; Christopher, Nelson, & Nelson, 2003; Smith et al., 2007). Given these differences in interpretation and valuation we consider in the final part of this paper how we might contend with such differences.

Releasement, Hermeneutic Dialogue, and Mindfulness

If cultures are moral topographies with different ontological assumptions and moral aspirations, how are we to proceed as theorists, researchers, and practitioners? I believe that it is imperative for psychologists to begin to think interpretively about cultural influences. This entails discerning how we are, to use Bruner's (1990) phrase, "expressions of culture" in our professional and personal lives. It requires ongoing exploration and explication of the ways culture impacts the different fields of psychology, as well as discerning how

culture influences our own thoughts, feelings, and behavior as well as those of others from differing cultural backgrounds.

Working across cultures and negotiating cultural differences is facilitated by recognizing what is at stake in these interactions, namely different moral sources that inform different understandings of what the person is and what the person should be or become (Christopher, 1996, 2001). Having a moral interpretation of the cultural, like the one sketched here, that models how culture, the self, and the good are inescapably intertwined, helps us to orient ourselves as we attempt to see more specifically how culture manifests itself and shapes all human phenomenon.

There is no clear-cut formula or method for arbitrating the clash of moral visions that often occurs when we encounter cultural differences. Western psychology is part folk psychology, part indigenous psychology, and part science. As such it is deeply immersed in its own cultural traditions, meaning that it cannot provide an objective standpoint. There are no standards or criteria that somehow stand outside the fray of culture for evaluating these deep ontological assumptions and moral commitments. Failing to recognize this means that we are unconsciously privileging some cultural orientations at the expense of others (usually those outside of our own tradition and those with less power). Certainly, it would be convenient if science could provide an algorithm to get at Truth. But as Gadamer (1975) details, we can not rely on method to reveal Truth.

This does not mean, however, that we are mired in the kind of epistemological, ethical, and cultural relativism this is so alarming to cultural conservatives. As Bernstein (1983) so clearly discusses, there is a way beyond objectivism and relativism. Hermeneutics can be thought of as a way of pursuing truth without certainty. Truth becomes here more associated with the process of pursuing truth than coming to any final and certain facts, beliefs, and theories, especially about the human condition. Similarly, Toulmin (2001) encourages us to replace our obsessions with a narrow form of rationality, that through scientific method can guarantee epistemological certainty, with *reasonableness* or practical reason. Truth without certainty entails developing the “best accounts” we can while realizing they are always partial and fallible and most likely in error in some as of yet undiscovered way (Taylor, 1989).

What we can rely on is the kind of engagement that Gadamer (1975) described as hermeneutic dialogue. And requisite to this kind of dialogue is what he called *openness*. While a moral perspective on culture, like the one offered in this paper, can alert us to what is potentially at stake, psychologically we may or may not be open at any given moment to risking our own presuppositions in order to learn from others. Whereas Gadamer does not detail the psychological requisites

of openness, we can see that engaging in openness requires a kind of psychological vulnerability—an ability to suspend, bracket or even, to be existential about it, die to our preconceptions, expectations, and desires about life and ourselves (see also Friedman, 1985). It requires us to live, at least temporarily, in ambiguity and uncertainty. And this can be tremendously anxiety provoking, leading us to become defensive by shutting down, withdrawing, or attempting to control or dominate the other.

Gadamer's account, by suggesting that authentic encounters with difference require certain psychological capacities or a certain kind of character, brings to light and underscores the poverty of notions like *cultural competence*. While well-meaning in the recognition of the cultural ignorance that dominates the history of Western psychology and the intent to help facilitate cross-cultural interactions, the way the issue is framed - competence - reinforces an instrumental and strategic stance. Ironically, as many critics have illustrated, this very stance is not only endemic to American individualism but it is deeply engrained and uncritically assumed in much of Western psychology. It is largely this stance, combined with the lack of ability in Western psychology to recognize how it is part of this cultural orientation, that resulted in the need for cultural competence in the first place. This is not to say that proponents of cultural competency are advocating individualism or a strategic orientation; it is instead to point out how difficult it is to find language or conceptual frameworks that avoid the pull of individualistic assumptions. Despite the best of intentions, it is all too easy to slide back into habitual ways of thinking and approaching others. And as Buber (1970) pointed out, this can mean treating others as an "it" instead of a "Thou."

Competence is a far cry from the kind of "spiritual surrender" or leap of faith that the openness of genuine hermeneutic dialogue requires. Cultural competence also does not seem to recognize that what underlies these cross-cultural exchanges, and is at stake in them, are moral visions (Christopher, 1996, 2001; Christopher & Smith, 2006). Given all of this it seems far more compelling to encourage what Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) call *cultural humility* instead of cultural competence.

Unfortunately, Gadamer does not really tell us how to accomplish this task of openness; and as we all know, it is one thing to espouse openness and another to practice it. Some help might come if we turn the historical clock backwards. Heidegger (1966) discussed in his brief book *Discourse on Thinking* the idea of *releasement*. Heidegger believed that real thinking, genuine or authentic thinking, entailed an openness to the world to allow it to appear to us in its own terms. He contrasted this kind of thinking with what he termed *calculative thinking*—a more strategic and instrumental form of thought that entails

forming calculations within pre-established parameters. One impact of technology on human beings, Heidegger believed, is that it encourages excessive reliance on calculative thinking. His fear was that “the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced *as the only* way of thinking” (p. 56). While Heidegger saw that calculative thinking had its uses, it is ultimately a type of “thoughtlessness” as it remains within the “conditions that are given” and fails to contemplate “the meaning which reigns in everything that is” (p. 46). Fortunately, Heidegger believed we also have the capacity for “meditative thinking” and that “the proper exercise of this capacity, difficult though it is in terms of releasement toward things and openness to mystery, can lead to a new ground of meaning” (p. 21).

There is a mystical or mindful element to this thought and it is not a coincidence that Heidegger flirted with Taoism and Zen Buddhism through much of his career and was working on a German translation of the *Tao Te Ching* at one point (Caputo, 1986). For instance, Heidegger’s idea of releasement parallels the Zen notion of *suchness* (tathatā). Nishitani (1982) states that primary experience of *suchness* exists when “all things make themselves present here and now, just as they are, in their original reality. They represent themselves in their *tathatā*” (p. 34).

Mindfulness practices such as meditation, contemplative prayer, yoga, qigong, and tai chi, offer a means of being open. For instance, in qualitatively studying the impact of mindfulness practice on counselor training, we (Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008) found students reporting the following kinds of changes in their readiness for dialogue and cultural learning: more awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions, less anxiety and emotional reactivity, more ability to tolerate ambiguity, more vulnerability, more comfort sitting in silence, more presence and empathy, and less pressure to control the session or fix the other person,

Mindfulness practices can serve as preparation for hermeneutic dialogue and cultural learning. Or better yet, hermeneutic dialogue is a form of mindfulness. Genuine openness to others is mindfulness in action. Meditation can also be a kind of hermeneutic dialogue with ourselves as we open to our own experience, letting it challenge our prejudgments.

Researchers, as much as theorists and practitioners, can benefit from mindfulness practices and the openness they engender: an openness that Lorenz (1963) endorsed when he advised research scientists “to discard a pet hypothesis every day before breakfast.” Researchers who have not cultivated the ability to keep themselves fully present will lack the cognitive and emotional flexibility necessary to recognize,

consider and explore possibilities outside their own comfort zones. To learn which of the researchers' questions and directions seem unnatural, trivial or irrelevant, researchers should routinely engage in dialogue with those who participate in their research: a practice that at present, few cross-cultural researchers employ (Paranjpe, 1997). An even deeper level of commitment to these principles comes through the practice of full partnership research seen in community-based participatory research approaches (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

Mindfulness practices have traditionally been thought of as disciplines. It requires discipline to be non-defensive when our assumptions are threatened and to be unattached to cherished beliefs and expected outcomes. Encounters across cultures inevitably entail ambiguity and uncertainty. The anxiety this provokes in us is typically acted out in ways that close off the possibility of releasement and openness. Mindfulness practices can help us to observe our own anxiety, noticing that it ebbs and flows. And in watching the waves we can increasingly become more adept at releasement and cultivate the "openness to mystery" that is surely a part of all cultural interactions.

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