What Is a Person?

Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up

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CHAPTER TWO

Key Theoretical Resources

This book's argument relies directly upon three key intellectual resources that I presuppose and marshal to develop my theory of personhood: critical realism, philosophical personalism, and an anti-naturalistic phenomenological epistemology. I have already drawn upon these resources to make my case in the previous chapter. Before pressing on, it seems prudent to stop and examine these theoretical resources more explicitly and systematically in order to be clear about the sources of my argument for critical realist personalism. The larger case I develop in this book may raise various theoretical objections from different readers, particularly those who do not understand the theoretical assumptions underwriting it. In order to minimize such dissent and keep the focus on the critical and constructive case I develop, I seek here to anticipate and answer such objections and to deepen our understanding of critical realist personalism by laying out my basic theoretical presuppositions that inform it. This theoretical material is somewhat dense and abstract, but is essential to grasp, ultimately, for making sense of my case in this book. The following pages summarize some dense theoretical material through which readers are encouraged to wade before moving on—with the promise that it will pay off in greater understanding of my larger argument and of the purpose and nature of social scientific inquiry and human personal life.

Critical Realism

Critical realism is a postpositivist and post-Winchean philosophy of (social) science that was expressed originally in the form I appropriate here by the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar and that is currently being developed by various scholars, especially in England and Scandinavia, including Margaret Archer, Andrew Sayer, Andrew Collier, and Mats Ekström.  

1. Post-Winchean means having assimilated the insights but worked past the shortcomings of Peter Winch's seminal work, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958)—or, to use an even less felicitous phrase, it means post-post-Wittgensteinian (but see Phil Hutchinson, Rupert Read, and Wes Sharrock, *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science: In Defense of Peter Winch* [Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2008]).

Critical realism seeks to offer a constructive framework for understanding science that is alternative to both the positivist empiricist paradigm, on the one hand, and constructivism, postmodernism, and certain versions of the hermeneutical perspective, on the other. The struggle between these two broad alternatives, advanced in different times in different forms, has left the social sciences deadlocked in a debate that cannot be resolved within its own terms. Critical realism seeks to transcend that sterile impasse by articulating a coherent, third-way alternative. I believe critical realism succeeds in this and so I wish to advance it further in American sociology. For present purposes, I believe critical realism opens a window for understanding the human in more illuminating and satisfying ways than do rival approaches.

I cannot here adequately, much less fully, explain critical realist philosophy. Readers interested in learning more will have to explore the many relevant works on critical realism beyond this book. For present purposes, it will have to suffice simply to note briefly some of its key ideas, some of which I have and will more fully explain and employ in other chapters. Critical realism’s central organizing thought is that much of reality exists independently of human consciousness of it; that reality itself is complex, open, and stratified in multiple dimensions or levels, some of which come to exist through the crucial process of emergence; that humans can acquire a truthful, though fallible knowledge and understanding of reality through various forms of disciplined conceptualization, inquiry, and theoretical reflection; that (social) science is rightly concerned with, first, identifying what is real and, second, understanding and explaining real causal capacities, mechanisms, and processes that operate in reality to produce various events and outcomes of interest (rather than discovering allegedly law-governed regularities among observable events or, for social scientists, merely interpreting meanings that actions have for actors); and, finally, that knowledge and understanding of the truths about reality position knowers to critically engage the world in normative, prescriptive, and even moral terms in ways that may overcome the traditional fact-value divide and intentionally try to shape the world for the better.

In critical realism, to spell out a few specifics, ontology (the study of being) is prioritized over epistemology (the study of what and how we can know)—a move that feels alien to us moderns and postmoderns who naturally prioritize epistemology, but which we nevertheless must make presuppositionally to get anywhere worth going in science. That which is cannot be immediately constrained by limits on the knowable of it. First we come to terms with what we believe is and what it is like, then we examine the possibilities for knowing about it. According to critical realism, the real is not coterminal with the empirical. So, we must distinguish among the three aspects of the real, the actual, and the empirical. The real is what exists—material, nonmaterial, and social entities that have structures and capacities. The real exists whether we know or understand it. The real possesses objective being apart from human awareness of it. The actual, by contrast, is what happens as events in the world, when objects that belong to the real activate their powers and capacities. The actual happens in time and space, whether we experience it or not. The empirical, by contrast, consists of what we experience, either directly or indirectly. Thus, what we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual), and neither is identical to that which is (the real). The three must not be conflated.

Also, as I have said, not everything that is real is observable, since reality possesses a “deep” dimension operating below the surface of direct human apprehension. Critical realism thus opposes strict empiricism, such as what David Hume advanced in claiming that “as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation.”4 If we want to understand reality, we must open our minds to the

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fact that not all of it is observable. At the most minute end, for example, the smallest bits of matter are not humanly observable, yet we use reliance on what we can observe, reasoning minds, theoretical coherence, and observable trace effects of the unobservable to reason through retrodiction toward believing that they do exist. At the supercosmic end, cosmologists are now seriously positing the reality of such things as parallel universes, multiverses, alternative timelines, and such—none of which are observable—to best explain through retrodiction the universe as we do observe and understand it. Again, as I have mentioned, reality exists with its own objective structures and dynamics independently of human cognition of it—people do not construct reality but only construct more or less well their meaningful beliefs about and interpretations and understandings of reality. The point of science, then, is to conform the shape of our minds to the nature of the reality that exists beyond (but also including) our minds. We can do this because reality embodies a structured order and operation that is not merely the construction of our minds. Further, scientific knowledge is fallible but not all equally fallible. Contra empirical realism, scientific knowledge never perfectly corresponds to reality. Contra strong constructivism, scientific knowledge is not hopelessly relativistic in merit. We must live with the fact that we never have perfect human knowledge of the real. Still, some accounts of the real are identifiably better than other accounts. Again, it is the job of human knowing generally and science specifically to engage the process of sorting through the merits of different accounts.

Human knowledge has both intransitive and transitive dimensions that should not be conflated. The former concerns the real objects of scientific knowledge, the latter the content of our human knowledge of those objects in reality. The transitive aspects of knowledge are (fallible) social products that change over time. The intransitive aspects of knowledge may be social products (e.g., real social structures) but often they are not social products (e.g., atoms, stars, etc.). The key points are that

5. The words of Hamlet may thus apply well to many of us: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5.


the intransitive usually does not depend upon the transitive for its being, and that the transitive can change without changing the intransitive object that is the focus of its attention. Further, objective reality is by nature not flat but stratified, existing on multiple, though connected, levels, each of which operates according to its own characteristic dynamics and processes. We live in a multilayered reality, it turns out, and our framework for understanding reality must be attuned to that fact—a point discussed in the previous chapter. Reductionistic scientific explanations are typically misguided and should be resisted, because they artificially flatten what is a stratified reality—critical realism is thus strongly antireductionistic. The best way to understand and explain something is usually at the level of reality at which it exists, not by reductionistically decomposing it into its component parts at a lower level. Again, this is a view I already began to unpack in chapter 1. Furthermore, the combination or interaction of two or more phenomena at one level often gives rise through emergence to new phenomena at a higher level, which possess characteristic properties and capacities that are irreducible to their constituent parts at the lower level from which they emerged. New forms of reality emerge from lower forms and comprise properties and capacities that are more than the sum of the parts from which they are made. This point will be particularly important for my argument and, like the previous two, has already appeared in the previous chapter.

Causation is real. Causality has to do with real causal capacities and mechanisms, not with the association of regular sequences of observed events. Thus, the Humean “successionist” theory is rejected in favor of causal realism emphasizing the natural causal powers of entities. Causes exist, adhering in the capacities of different aspects of reality to make things happen, even though we cannot often see that. Humean skepticism about and redefinition of causation is interesting but misguided. Furthermore, causes are context-dependent tendencies exerting varying degrees of strength on outcomes, not universal laws of consistent influence that

7. In fact, there very well may be more levels or dimensions of the totality of reality than those on which humans can get purchase through normal or even any means within our power, just as there are certain frequencies of sound and specific ranges in the spectrum of light that the human ear and eye cannot naturally hear or see. In such cases, we may need to employ indirect means of observation and human reasoning to infer their real existence; or perhaps such realities have their own capacities to make their existence known to humans under certain conditions; or perhaps most or all humans will simply never know about those dimensions of reality.
are either always or never operative. The same causal forces may help to produce a host of different kinds of social outcomes. And different causal forces may produce similar classes of social outcomes. Scientific inquiry as a project should be concerned more with the structured properties of causal relations and mechanisms than with the regularity of observable sequences of events—theorizing unobserved causal dynamics is what the best of science actually does and is more important than measuring the strength of association between variables. The latter is done primarily in service to the former. Again, the focus is more on the nature of the real than on the events of the empirical. Not only are material objects real, but many (at least partially) nonmaterial, emergent phenomena, such as social structures and human cognition, are also real, insofar as they possess emergent, durable, causal power. Reality can be nonmaterial. We must also distinguish between closed systems versus open systems in reality, each of which requires a different scientific approach. In closed systems, generative mechanisms can operate in conditions of isolation from the influence of other mechanisms, enabling the scientist more precisely to isolate causal relations and make predictions. In open systems, many generative mechanisms operate in complex combinations and interactions that cannot be cleanly isolated and identified, making causal analysis and prediction more difficult if not sometimes impossible. Closed systems are associated with many of the natural sciences, and open systems are associated with the social sciences and with some natural sciences. All things

8. Critical realism entails a major shift in thinking about causality, which unfortunately I cannot further develop in the present discussion but about which much of importance has already been published. See, for starters, Porpora, "Recovering Causality: Realist Methods in Sociology," in Realismo Sociológico, ed. Maccari, Morandi, and Prandini; Porpora, "Sociology's Causal Confusion," in Revitalizing Causality, ed. Groff; Manicas, A Realist Philosophy of Social Science; Danemark et al., Explaining Society, 52-53, 56, 59, 74; Sayer, Method in Social Science.


10. Although not all and in all ways; certain fields of biology, for example, have difficulty creating experimental closure.

humanly social operate in open systems, making the task of social science more difficult. A pure "unity of science" assumption drawn from positivism is thus rejected in favor of an acknowledgment that the social sciences are in crucial—though not all—ways distinct from the natural sciences. Because social phenomena are always intrinsically meaningful to and for both those who constitute them (people) and those who seek to understand and explain them (social scientists), following on Peter Winch we see that social science necessarily has a hermeneutical dimension that requires the interpretive work of cultural understanding. Yet interpretive social science cannot, on these grounds, as has been typical of some previous hermeneutic perspectives, reject causal analysis, since causality is real, meanings are embedded in a causally operative reality, and meaningful cultural reasons possess causal powers for humans. All social science has an interpretive aspect, but not all that the social sciences study consists of meanings requiring interpretation. Therefore, hermeneutical sociology does not need to reject the causality of "science" in social science, since doing so presupposes the false strong division between naturwissenschaften and geisteswissenschaften maintained historically by both positivism and German hermeneutics.

We should be far more prepared than positivist empiricism has allowed us to be to engage not only in deduction, induction, and statistical inference, but also in retroduction. Retroduction is the thought operation reconstructing the basic conditions for anything to be what it is, providing knowledge of the properties that are required for a phenomenon to exist. Retroduction thus recurrently asks the question, "What must be true, even if we cannot observe it, for what we believe exists to be what it is?" The larger goal of science is to produce generalizable claims. Generalizations, however, from a critical realist perspective, should more concern transfactual conditions of reality than universal laws or probabilistic inferences to populations. Ideographic study, as normally conceived today, is thus rejected as underachieving, while nomothetic science in its usual positivist forms is rejected as misguided in its view of laws, empiricism, and determinism. Social science should seek to generalize. But its generalizations should focus on the structured and causal nature of the real, not so much on the regularity of events. As to method, socials science should embrace methodological pluralism, transcending old assumptions that
have given rise to the sterile quantitative versus qualitative divide, and
instead focusing on the choices involving “extensive” versus “intensive”
methods driven pragmatically by the particular subject and question un-
der study. Whereas critical realism is principled on questions of ontology,
it is pragmatic on questions of method. Within the critical realist frame-
work of knowledge, methods should be applied that are most appropriate
for the precise subject of study and the questions researchers ask about
it. Finally, by conceiving itself as critical realism (instead of so-called em-
pirical realism or scientific realism), this approach signals a particular
orientation. What “critical” intends to communicate about this realism is
its antifoundationalist character, its fallibilist understanding of science as
a socially situated human practice, its resistance to modernity’s absolute
separation of fact from value, and its readiness to engage in normative
critical theory without (because of its ontological realism) collapsing into
ideology and crass academic political activism.

Through the development of a coherent framework reliant on these
commitments and beliefs, critical realism seeks—successfully, I think—to
transcend a host of unhappy dualisms that have long divided the social
sciences. In summarizing only the first of three intellectual resources in-
forming this book, I have already offered a lot of abstraction packed into
a few paragraphs. That will have to do for now as the outline of one of the
perspectives that is crucial in developing the argument that follows. Some
of the ideas noted above may give some readers some clue as to what criti-
cal realism is and where I want to go with it. Other readers will have to
wait until other chapters unpack and deploy these ideas more clearly.

**Personalism**

The second intellectual resource on which I draw to develop my argu-
ment about the nature of human being is the philosophical perspective
known as personalism. Describing personalism is more difficult than sum-
marizing critical realism because as a framework of thought it is more
amorphous, and its historical articulation has been more varied and in-
termittent. Personalism is a broad philosophical school of thought that
developed most clearly as explicit intellectual movements in two dif-
ferent contexts: in continental Europe in the early twentieth century and
in Boston, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth and early to mid-
twentieth centuries. The European movement, which developed particu-
larly, though not exclusively, among Catholic intellectuals, was
thrust by the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. The American personalist
movement, not subject to the same threats, evolved more freely into a
fifth generation of theorists. Leaders in the European personalist move-
ment included Emmanuel Mounier, Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, and
Gabriel Marcel. Personalist leaders in the United States included Borden
Parker Bowne, George Holmes Howison, John Wesley Edward Bowen,
and Edgar Sheffield Brightman. The intellectual roots of personalism in
both Europe and America go back, in various and sometimes indirect
ways, to a variety of famous and less famous thinkers. More recently, per-
sonalist theorists have included the older Jacques Maritain, expatriated
to the United States; the Hungarian chemist turned philosopher Michael
Polanyi; the Polish phenomenologist Karol Wojtyla; and the American

12. Or what Isaac Reed—in, I think, a largely off-the-mark critique of critical realism—

13. Personalism has strong affinities with theism, although that connection is not nec-
essary; there are, for instance, according to the personalist scholar Rufus Burrow Jr., both
atheistic and pantheistic versions of personalism, reflected in the writings of John McTaggart and

14. See Burrow, Personalism: A Critical Introduction; Paul Deats and Carol Robb, eds.,

15. These include, in various ways, Aristotle, Athenasius of Alexandria, Gregory the
Great, Peter of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, Maire de Biran, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich
Heinrich Jacobi, Immanuel Kant, Rudolph Hermann Lotze, Friedrich W. J. Schelling, Max
Scheier, Nicholas Berdyaev, Charles Renouvier, John Henry Newman, Maurice Blondel,
Etienne Gilson, Henri Bergson, Marcel Péguy, and Karl Jaspers.
philosopher John Crosby. Other more contemporary writers developing various aspects of personalist theory include Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Thomas Williams, Stephen Evans, Alistair McFadyen, Richard Bayer, Martin Luther King Jr., Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Zizioulas, Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day, Thomas Rourke, John Macmurray, Robert Spaemann, and Rosita Chazarreta Rourke.

The rise of personalism must be properly understood in its intellectual, social, and political context. European personalism sought to offer an alternative to the liberal individualism that had transformed Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by emphasizing the person over the individual and community solidarity over atomization. Indeed, personalism insists on speaking of people as “persons” instead of “indi-


19. The idealism native to Boston personalism—believing that “all reality is in some sense personal”—is, I believe, misguided and incompatible with the critical realist beliefs in the stratification of reality and in emergence developed in this book, even if its instinct in resisting materialism was correct. On idealist personalism, see Flewelling, “Personalism,” in Twentieth-Century Philosophy: Living Schools of Thought, ed. Runes; Paul Deats, “Introduction to Boston Personalism,” in The Boston Personalist Tradition, ed. Deats and Robb. The “all reality” quote is from Flewelling, “Personalism,” 324.
intellectual and moral legacy, despite ambiguities and problems, that is worth retrieving, amending, and developing today.20

The central idea in personalism relevant for my argument is deceptively simple. This is the belief that human beings are persons. I realize that to many this will seem no more enlightening than saying that dogs are canines. But it is not that straightforward. To claim that humans are persons, to develop what it means to be a person, and to take that personalist viewpoint seriously in our social scientific work is more consequential and challenging than it first appears. To believe that humans are persons, not something else, and to grasp the meanings and ramifications of that belief, is to stake out a position among rival positions that is neither self-evident nor universally shared or reflected in academic scholarship. Of course, person is a word we use in our discourse pervasively and without much thought. But an exploration of the meanings of “person” reveals that it involves significant, distinctive substantive content that carves out a view of humanity that is different from other, seemingly viable positions.21 It actually means something quite momentous to say that humans are persons while ferns and baboons are not.

To claim that humans are persons is to say that humans are something qualitatively more than and different from what many alternative views construe humans to be. Such a claim believes that there are characteristic qualities of human being that cannot be reduced to the elements of other, nonpersonalist realities. Personalism claims more for and about humans, we will see, for example, than the model of humans as fundamentally rational, self-interested, exchange-making calculators of costs and benefits—a common model in the social sciences. It believes there is more to the human than being the constituents of functional social orders, which are the agents of action, who fulfill their roles in order to meet the requisite needs and goals of those ordered systems.22 Personalism claims something different and more than the postmodern view of humans as discursively constructed positions of shifting identities pieced together in the flux of variable meanings and power relations. It also conflicts with the view that humans are nothing more than corporeal sites though which regimes of power express themselves through bodily discipline. Personalism says more about the human than the version of interactionist theory that characterizes people as essentially strategic, dramatic presenters of performances driven by culturally specified scripts. It also conflicts with the sociobiological and evolutionary psychology model of humans as essentially biological carriers of “selfish” genetic material that has been naturally selected upon for its superior reproductive fitness and that seeks to perpetuate itself through behavioral determination. Personalism claims that human beings are more than egos struggling to manage the id in the face of the superego. These are some of the models of human being that are available—and in some cases highly influential—in contemporary institutions of science and higher learning. To take a strong personalist view that humans are persons is to set oneself in tension, if not at odds, with many other perspectives. Some of those models may be harmonized with personalism, when understood nonreductionistically. But some of them are incompatible with personalism. Thus, when we say that someone is a person, we are, whether we know it or not, claiming a great deal about human nature that may or may not be obvious or taken seriously in the sciences and humanities.

What, then, do I mean by “person?” In the previous chapter I defined the person as a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who—as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world. The defining qualities of personhood in this approach demarcate persons from all things nonpersonal as existing on two different levels of

20. I distinguish, however, what I seek to develop here from a movement originating in the 1980s called “Economic Personalism” and associated with the Acton Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan, which—in its apparent semilibertarian economics and particular theory of the primacy of culture—appears to be at odds with the historical personalist tradition on which I am building. See Anthony Santelli Jr. et al., The Free Person and the Free Economy: A Personalist View of Economics (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002); Patricia Donohue-White et al., Human Nature and the Discipline of Economics (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002); Gregory Bebout et al., Beyond Self-Interest: A Personalist Approach to Human Action (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2002).


22. In the sphere of political theory, personalism is analogously incompatible with the collectivist theory that humans are subordinate components of the nation or state, the primary unit of reality, into and for the larger interests and purposes of which the lives and interests of any number of single humans may be subsumed and consumed.
being, which separate every self who is a “you” from everything else that is an “it.” This personal/nonpersonal split, which I believe rightly “divides nature at its joints” in crucial though not all ways, helps to define a fundamental characteristic of the human social world that I think social scientists must recognize and for which they must provide an account. In Wojtyla's words, personalism expresses “a belief in the primordial uniqueness of the human being, and thus in the basic irreducibility of the human being to the natural world.”

23. It is worth better exploring what it means to be a person and what the consequences are for social scientific knowledge if humans are persons. That is what I attempt to do in drawing on philosophical personalism in the other chapters in this book.

Antiscientistic Phenomenology

Finally, I rely in developing my argument in this book on a particular phenomenological account of warranted knowledge that gives priority to certain features of experience that it claims are indispensable for making sense of our lives. That account is what I understand to be the antiscientistic phenomenological epistemology articulated by the philosopher Charles Taylor in his book Sources of the Self. Michael Polanyi’s Personal Knowledge also influences what follows. Explaining this account will take some effort but, again, it is worth laying out before moving on.

We have long been taught by a particular view of science to doubt the reliability of our lived experience as human persons to tell us true things about reality. This view of science has taught us that personal perception and experience are subjective, biased, and idiosyncratic and often produce misleading appearances, particularistic perspectives, and false models of reality. We see the sun moving, for example, but science tells us that really the sun is standing still—it is the earth that is moving. We think we have knowledge about reality, including about human life. They empower naturalistic scientism as the source of right knowledge, authorized to trump rival claims to understanding and explanation. The model for properly understanding the human and the social is natural science, not anything “humanistic” or subjectively based. Our personal, lived, subjective perceptions and understandings need to give way and be conformed to the claims of naturalistic sciences, or perhaps social sciences that are modeled on the natural sciences, as the final authority explaining reality.

Three background assumptions inform naturalistic scientism's view of science. The first is the ontological assumption of materialism, that what exists consists of physical matter, the forces of energy that animate matter, and the natural laws inherent in matter and energy that govern them. Everything is material nature. Immaterial entities that are not examinable by physics and chemistry—such as meanings, values, moral facts, and certainly things “spiritual”—do not exist.25 The second assumption concerns perspective and authority, namely, the premise that the natural sciences are neutral and objective, which is good and reliable, compared to personal human perception and experience, which are biased and subjective, and so problematic and untrustworthy. The third assumption built into naturalistic scientism's claims concerns right method—namely, that the best way to understand and explain anything is through reductionist analysis. The true properties and dynamics of any subject are best revealed by breaking the subject down into its component parts existing at lower levels to disclose the more primary elements constituting the subject. This reductionistic move points downward to explain, shifting toward increasingly elementary levels of reality.

These three background assumptions—materialism, objectivity, and reductionism—justify naturalistic scientism's discounting of people's phenomenological experience as a guide to valid and reliable knowledge about reality, including about human life. They empower naturalistic scientism as the source of right knowledge, authorized to trump rival claims to understanding and explanation. The model for properly understanding the human and the social is natural science, not anything “humanistic” or subjectively based. Our personal, lived, subjective perceptions and understandings need to give way and be conformed to the claims of naturalistic sciences, or perhaps social sciences that are modeled on the natural sciences, as the final authority explaining reality.


24. Taylor views his approach as antinaturalistic, and in the sense that he means it, I agree. However, I wish to apply his viewpoint in a more narrow fashion by opposing not naturalism broadly but naturalistic scientism specifically. There are forms of naturalism, Omar Lizardo has helped me to see, that are compatible with critical realism, and my account here can be understood and embraced from a certain naturalistic framework. So, while I reference naturalism in the following I focus especially on scientism.

25. Thus, for example, the early twentieth-century behaviorist psychologist John B. Watson wrote, “Consciousness . . . has never been seen, touched, smelled, tasted, or moved. It is plain assumption just as unprovable as the old concept of the soul. And to the behaviorist the two terms are essentially identical, so far as the metaphysical implications are concerned.” Watson, Behaviorism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 14.
naturalistic scientism and naturalistic social scientism. This view is widespread and deeply rooted in modern people's assumptions and beliefs. Even many people who know nothing about the history and philosophy of science have absorbed from the cultural atmosphere many of naturalistic scientism's suppositions and instincts.

Following Charles Taylor and others, however, I believe that when it comes to understanding the human world, naturalistic scientism's framework is inadequate. We have good reasons to doubt its picture of human persons and the knowledge of them it generates. We also have good reason to think that there is much important to learn about ourselves as human from our own best perceptions and experiences, even those that are personal and subjective. I rely in part on Taylor's phenomenological epistemology—or at least my reading of it—to build my argument about the nature of human personhood in this book. Because this approach runs so strongly against the grain of us moderns who are so shaped by naturalistic scientism, it is worth devoting more than a little space here to presenting it. In so doing I quote liberally from Taylor, since he has made the original strong case.

The starting point of this phenomenological approach that opposes naturalistic scientism is that terms of our experience that we cannot live without to best "make sense" of our lives provide legitimate and important clues about what is real. To be clear, the "terms" that Taylor is specifically defending in his argument are morality and value, though his argument can easily be extended to make sense of other aspects of human experience, such as personhood, to which naturalistic scientism is often blind.

So, when it comes to explaining human life, even social scientifically, the unavoidably personal experience of living life cannot be radically separated off as providing untrustworthy knowledge. As persons, all we have is our best personal knowledge about the world we live in, gained through a variety of methods, including but not limited to naturalistic science. Since reality is a unity, terms we need to make sense of our own experiences cannot automatically be cordoned off from informing the narrower task of scientific inquiry and explanations.26

26. Thus, Charles Taylor asks, "What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives? 'Making the best sense' here includes ... allowing us best to understand and make sense of the actions and feelings of ourselves and others. ... These requirements are not yet met if we have some [naturalistic] theoretical language which purports to explain behavior from the observer's standpoint; but it is no use to the agent in making sense of his own thinking, feeling, and acting." Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 57. Also see Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy; various works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, such as "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man" (1958), in The Primacy of Perception, ed. James Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 43–95; Vincent Shen, "'Person' as the Central Concept in the Human and Social Sciences: An Interpretation of Edmund Husserl's Thought on the Human Person in Ideen Ii," in Human Dignity, ed. Miloslav Bednar (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1990); E. Rae Harcum, A Psychology of Freedom and Dignity (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

27. Taylor, Sources of the Self, 57.

28. "The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensable for the latter are part of the story that makes best sense to us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best accounts we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense is trumps. Let me call this the BA principle." Ibid., 58.

But what does it mean, "not to be able" to do without a term to make sense of life? Taylor explains, "I mean that this term is indispensable to (what now appears to me to be) the clearest, most insightful statements of the issues before me. If I were to be denied this term, I wouldn't be able to deliberate as effectively, to focus the issue properly—as, indeed, I may feel . . . that I was less capable of doing in the past, before I acquired this term."27 And which kind of "terms" ought we to rely upon? Exactly those terms we employ to make sense of a wide range of life experiences and explanations, which seem indispensable for making life the most clear and understandable to us as it can be, for which over time we seem not to be able to find better substitutes. This approach is what Taylor calls "the BA Principle," BA meaning "best account."28 Included in the category of indispensable terms, according to Taylor, are the idea of morality, values and human dignity—none of which is tangible but each of which seems to us nonetheless inescapably real.

Taylor then argues that we are entitled to grant epistemic authority to the terms of our best accounts, those that provide greatest insight in focusing issues as best as we are able and for living our lives. Of course, best accounts rely on human perceptions and judgments, but that is all anyone ever has to go on anyway. There is no way or reason to back away from our larger trust in our phenomenological experience and the best accounts to which they give rise as we sort through our unique experiences as persons and together as communities. There exists no autonomous, experience-
independent standpoint or foundation of evaluation by which to more objectively judge our own experiences and the best sense we can make of them. Attempts to do so have led to irresolvable forms of skepticism. True, we recurrently learn that some of our prior beliefs and accounts were wrong, that alternative accounts are better, and so we change our perceptions, thinking, and interpretations about important matters. But we always do that by struggling through experience and hitting upon better accounts of them, not by asking some allegedly neutral scientific principle that is alien to our phenomenological experience to tell us true things that overrule our best accounts.\textsuperscript{29}

As a result, theories and terms that falsify our lived experience and are impossible to live with ought finally to have no epistemological authority for or trump what by our best accounts seems real to us. Why exactly ought we to trust our own phenomenological experience? Taylor answers:

This is ... an exploration of the limits of the conceivable in human life. ... The aim of this account is to examine how we actually make sense of our lives, and to draw the limits of the conceivable from our knowledge of what we actually do when we do so. But what description of human possibilities, drawn from some questionable epistemological theories, ought to trump what we can decry from within the practice itself as the limits of our possible ways of making sense of our lives? After all, the ultimate basis for accepting any theories is precisely that they make better sense of us than do their rivals. If any view takes us right across the boundary and defines as normal or possible a human life which we would find incomprehensible or pathological, it can't be right.\textsuperscript{30}

Therefore, naturalism cannot discard what is indispensable for living as mere (unreal) appearance, unless its rival account provides "epistemo-

\textsuperscript{29} Taylor writes, "The idea that we ought to preclude altogether from this background confidence of purchase [of phenomenological perception] is ... unjustified. ... This would mean checking the trustworthiness of this confidence against something else. But this something else would have to be quite outside the perceivable, and thus gives us an impossible task. Classical epistemology was always threatening to drive into this cul-de-sac and therefore fall into the despair of skepticism. Of course ... our confidence on a particular occasion might be misplaced. But we discover this only by shifting out of one purchase into another, more adequate one. ... The most reliable ... view is not one that would be grounded outside our intuitions, but one that is grounded on our strongest intuitions, where these have successfully met the challenge of proposed transition away from them." Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 32.

logical gain" in making better sense of our lives.\textsuperscript{31} We ought to reject, in other words, social science concepts and theories that may predict some observed empirical association, but that we could not fit into the actual living of our lives, no matter how otherwise elegant or impressive they appear.\textsuperscript{32}

For these reasons, naturalistic scientism's project is often inappropriate when applied to humans, who involve real phenomena for which naturalism is not able to account. Belief in the absolute unity of science—that is, the belief that the same kind of (naturalistic) science is needed for human and social life as for the natural world—is therefore at least partly wrong, since different subject matters require qualitatively different kinds of

\textsuperscript{31} "This kind of indispensability of a term in a non-explanatory context of life can't just be declared irrelevant to the project to do without that term in an explanatory reduction. The widespread assumption that it can comes from a premise buried deep in the naturalist way of thinking, viz., that the terms of everyday life, those in which we go about living our lives, are to be relegated to the realm of mere appearance. They are to be taken no more seriously for explanatory purposes than the visual experience of the sun going down behind the horizon is in cosmology. But this assimilation is untenable. We can see excellent reasons why my perception of the horizon at sunset ought to be sidelined in face of the evidence of, e.g., satellite observations. But what ought to trump the language in which I actually live my life? This is not (quite) a rhetorical question, because we do sometimes offer accounts of what people are about in their likes, dislikes, deliberations, and so forth which purport to be more perceptive, shorn of certain delusions or limitations of vision that affect the people themselves. But these [alternatives] are also terms in which the individuals can live their lives. Indeed, we frequently offer them to the people concerned as an improvement on their own self-understandings. What is preposterous is the suggestion that we ought to disregard altogether the terms that can figure in the non-explanatory contexts of living for the purposes of our explanatory theory." Ibid., 57-58.

\textsuperscript{32} "Theories ... which declare 'phenomenology' to be irrelevant on principle are based on a crucial mistake. They are 'changing the subject,' in Donald Davidson's apt expression. What we need to explain is people living their lives; the terms of which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn't fit some model of 'science' and that we know a priori that human beings must be explicable in this 'science.' This begs the question. How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory until we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?" And again: "Our understanding has been clouded by the naturalist epistemology and its focus on the natural science model. ... But if our ... ontology springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at, and if this account must be in anthropocentric terms, terms which relate to the meanings things have for us, then the demand to start outside of all such meanings, not to rely on our moral intuitions or on what we find morally moving, is in fact [simply] a proposal to change the subject." Ibid., 71.
sciences (although, where the unity of science view is correct, in my [but not Taylor's] view, is believing that the purpose of both the natural and social sciences is to understand and explain causally what is real and how and why it operates or acts as it does). Taylor elaborates:

Of course, the terms of our best account will never figure into a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. This is the complement to the anti-Aristotelian purge of natural science in the seventeenth century. Just as physical science is no longer anthropocentric, so human science can no longer be couched in the terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. The reality is, of course, dependent upon us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with.\(^\text{33}\)

In order to gain a revealing perspective on these matters, Taylor suggests that it is helpful to "turn the tables" by seeing that naturalistic scientism's premises are often driven not by the real epistemic gain they provide—which is scant when applied to human doings—but instead by the very kind of nonnaturalistic, "spiritual" values, commitments, and emotions that naturalistic scientism denies. Taylor thus observes: "Some naturalists propose to treat all moral ontologies as irrelevant stories, without validity, while they themselves go on arguing like the rest of us about what [moral] objects are fit and what reactions appropriate. What generally happens here is that the reductive explanation . . . which supposedly justifies this exclusion, itself takes on the role of moral ontology."\(^\text{36}\) To overcome this ironic, "ideologically induced illusion," Taylor suggests the need to articulate the hidden values driving naturalists, to show "to what extent the real spiritual basis of their own moral judgments deviates from what is officially admitted." This is necessary, Taylor claims, because "there is a great deal of motivated suppression of moral ontology among our [naturalistic] contemporaries . . . because of the great weight of modern epistemology . . . and, behind this, of the spiritual outlook associated with this epistemology."\(^\text{36}\) This, I think, is a huge point with enormous implications.

Further, in all scientific knowledge, it is important to realize that no particular understanding is infallible or final, that all any of us can have at any time is our best account, in which we are entitled to have real, though not absolute or unquestioning, confidence. What we are always dealing with is reducing error and searching for relatively better explanations, not finding absolute or indubitable truth. Taylor explains: "Practical reasoning . . . is a reasoning in transitions. It aims to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned, covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions. We show one of these comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the move from A to B constitutes a gain epistemically."\(^\text{37}\) Of course, Taylor admits, we may be wrong. But that does not mean we cannot be right. And it does not mean we have an alternative approach available that guarantees that we will be right. The only means available for determining the "bestness" of our accounts is by

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\(^{33}\) Thus, unity-of-science views of methodology, such as that reflected by Baruch Spinoza here, are rejected: "I shall consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner, as though I were concerned with lines, planes, and solids" (Spinoza, The Ethics, Part 3, [1677; New York: Dover, 1955], 129); instead, I endorse a view closer to that of Robert Redfield: "In most of social science, human nature is itself a part of the method. One must use one's own humanity as a means to understanding. The physicist need not sympathize with the atom, nor the biologist with his fruit flies, but the student of people and institutions must employ his own human sympathies in order to discover what people think or feel and what the institutions mean." Redfield, "Social Science among the Humanities," in vol. 1 of Human Nature and the Study of Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 52; and of Florian Znanieki: "In contrast with the natural scientist, who seeks to discover an order among empirical data entirely independent of conscious human agents, the student of culture seeks to discover any order among empirical data which depends upon conscious human agents, is produced, and is maintained by them." Znanieki, Cultural Science [1952; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963], 132. But again, the natural and social sciences are not different from each other when it comes to their goals; both seek to know what is real and to understand and explain causally how and why it behaves or acts as it does—it is simply the case that to understand and explain causally in the social sciences, one must take seriously things like subjective meanings that are absent in the natural sciences and for which naturalism cannot account.

\(^{34}\) Taylor, Sources of the Self, 59.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 9-10. In Columbia University philosopher Charles Larmore's words, "Naturalism is . . . one of the great prejudices of our age. It is widely shared and explicitly affirmed. . . . But naturalism is far more often assumed and deployed for various purposes than examined in its own right and supported by argument. It faces, in fact, grave philosophical difficulties so serious and so obvious that only dogmatic precommitment can account for why they are rarely even acknowledged." Larmore, The Morals of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

\(^{37}\) Taylor, Sources of the Self, 72.
subjecting them to the strongest critiques and seeing whether they hold up or whether an alternative understanding or interpretation makes better sense of our phenomenological experience. We also have to subject those possible alternative accounts to critiques as well and see if adopting them will have provided us any significant “epistemic gain.” Every account will naturally have its difficulties and limits, and people will disagree about them. But that does not mean they are all useless or equally valid. In any case, there is no other or better means of understanding and explaining the reality we make up and inhabit.

How then do we come to our best accounts? Best accounts are arrived at by challenge, discussion, argumentation, reflection, criticism, vetting, that is, by testing against the clarity of experience, including through systematic observation and the discipline of reason. “As a result of our discussions, reflections, arguments, challenges, and examinations, we will come to see a certain vocabulary as the most realistic and insightful for the things of [the human] domain. What these terms pick out will be that which to us is real here, and it cannot and should not be otherwise. If we cannot deliberate effectively, or understand and explain people’s actions illuminatingly, without such terms . . . then these are real features of our world.”

In light of all of the preceding, human subjectivity—including values, meanings, morality, and, I shall argue, personal being—is as real as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality. Against people who are shaped by a naturalist-driven map of reality that view humans as ready objects of natural science living as physical reality.

What is real is what you have to deal with, what won’t go away just because it doesn’t fit with your prejudices. By this token, what you can’t help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get a grasp at present. . . . If non-realism can’t be supported by moral [or more broadly, essential phenomenological] experience, then there are no good grounds to believe it at all. . . .

38. Thus, Taylor writes, “I could be wrong . . . . But I could also be right. The only way to decide is by raising and facing this or that particular critique. Is there a transition out of my present belief which turns on an error-reducing move? . . . What successfully resists all such critique is my (provisionally) best account. There is nothing better I could conceivably have to go on. Or my critics either, for that matter. So says the BA principle.” Ibid., 74.
39. Ibid., 69. Richard McKeon advanced a different—clearly not critical realist—“pluralistic” account justifying a similar approach to progressively improving fallible knowledge.
40. Taylor, Sources of the Self, 59–60, italics in original.
41. Ibid., 69.
42. Ibid., 68.
43. Taylor goes so far as to extend this principle to theism, in saying, “The belief in God, say, offers a [good] reason not in [an external, naturalistic] sense but as an articulation of what is crucial to the shape of the [phenomenologically perceived] . . . world in one’s best account”; and “nothing prevents a priori our coming to see God as the Good as essential to our best account of the human moral world” (Ibid., 73, 76)—although this is not a point necessary for the reader to concede in order to believe my argument about personhood. For a nontheistic antinaturalistic defense of the objective existence of normative facts, see Larmore, The Morals of Modernity. Also see Russ Shafer-Landau, Moral Realism: A Defense (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
level of analysis for the subject at hand. It tends to fail to recognize or account for realities that are constitutive of and universally present in human being and social relations. By definition and mission statement, naturalistic scientism cannot recognize, much less adequately understand and account for, immaterial realities, like value, meaning, morality, and personhood. So it is stuck with the misguided task of denying, reducing, eliminating, and explaining away, with terms alien to the realities themselves, that which is often most important in human life. The solution, if we are interested in understanding and explaining humans, is to keep naturalism studying the nonhuman, natural world and humans only insofar as they are also natural entities, and to open up the study of things human to more expansive approaches that make more generous assumptions, use a wider range of concepts, and accept as real a larger set of existent entities and properties. This may and often will mean accepting and embracing the reality and importance of immaterial facts. This will also entitle us to rely on categories of normal human living (when well considered) to account for and explain human life, to rely on essential features of human experience to tell us what is true about what is real. Furthermore, we will be licensed to theorize retroductively if the results help to provide us a best account of life. All of this is important and helpful for the task of answering the question of human being in a way that takes the person seriously.

Taylor's antiscientistic phenomenological epistemology, as I read it, is so highly counterintuitive for the modern—and, for different reasons, the postmodern—mind that it warrants at least the introduction I have given it here. If his argument and its implications are not entirely transparent at this point, I hope they will become more so in the pages ahead.

Conclusion

The reader will no doubt have perceived the affinities among this phenomenological epistemology, critical realism, and personalism. All are decidedly antireductionistic. All are also comfortable with the notion that certain things are real even if they are not material or directly visible. And all trust to collective human experience and judgment, much more so than does naturalistic positivist empiricism, an authority to inform our reliable understandings of human being and life. My task in this book is to show how these perspectives, taken together, provide an account of human being that improves on its rivals.