CHAPTER IV

CHARLES TAYLOR’S CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMOLOGY: 2

In the last chapter an attempt was made to delineate Charles Taylor’s critique of modern epistemology in terms of his critique of normativism, foundationalism and representationalism as the focal points. In this chapter the aim is to further delve into his critical stance towards modern epistemological tradition by placing it in relation to the views of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau Ponty who preceded Taylor and whose views we have already dealt with in Chapter II. The thesis of representationalism, though is an epistemological thesis, has moulded social, moral and spiritual ideas of modern period. This is because modern epistemology which is worked out within the framework of representationalism has shaped not only the debates in philosophy but also the debates over various aspects of life, individual and collective. As Taylor notes, overcoming representationalism is not mere repudiation of epistemology, but also challenging the moral and the spiritual ideas which constitute the core of modernity as an ideology. In other words, the deeper understanding of representationalism would be possible not only through the analysis of epistemological doctrines but also through the analysis of social, moral and spiritual ideas of modern age.
IV.1 Charles Taylor on Husserl

Taylor’s response to the preceding critics of modern epistemology is mainly linked to their understanding of the limitations of Cartesian Epistemology. Among the many critics, Husserl is undoubtedly a tall figure who opened up new vistas of philosophical criticism of Cartesian Epistemology. Phenomenological movement founded by him, undoubtedly, exposes the inadequacies of the received philosophical/epistemological tradition central to which is third-person point of view. In our Chapter II, we discussed in detail how phenomenological movement altogether provides a first-person account of knowledge. Yet, Taylor considers that Husserl’s critique of epistemology is insufficient as it still labours within the Cartesian framework. According to him, Husserl’s criticisms are wanting because they failed to comprehend the depth and force of the modern epistemological tradition. Taylor considers that any attempt to evaluate Cartesian Epistemology in isolation from other philosophical debates and from the larger social context of the age is bound to be a shallow one. The modern epistemological tradition is closely connected with moral and spiritual ideas of the period. Taylor notes that modern epistemology and the modern moral and spiritual ideas stand in a complex relation of mutual support. And only if we are able to comprehend that complex relation, we would be able to evaluate modern epistemology in depth.

Taylor finds that though Husserl severs his relation with many of the major positions of modern epistemology, he remains a strong advocate of the spiritual and moral implications of the Cartesian framework. According to Taylor, representationalist characterization of human agency is mainly instrumental in shaping the ideas in other fields of the modern age. The powerful ideal of Cartesian Epistemology is the reflexive self-given certainty. In Cartesian Epistemology, certainty is determined by the ordering of our thoughts/beliefs and by examining the relation
between them. Consider a hypothesis like ‘Accident is caused by break failure of the vehicle’ or ‘The disease is caused by infection’. Modern epistemology advocates that certainty of all such hypotheses is determined by showing how such hypotheses are connected with other facts or basic facts or evidence. The link we draw between hypotheses and the facts determines the certainty of that hypothesis. That is why Taylor points out that “...certainty is something we can generate for ourselves, by ordering our thoughts correctly...” (Taylor, Charles.1995:5) And thus “...certainty is the child of reflexive clarity, or the examination of our own ideas in abstraction from what they “represent”…” (Ibid)

So, to be rational in the Cartesian sense is having a better ordering and having a close and strong relation between our thoughts. So, the Cartesian notion of rationality is footed or grounded in the nature of our beliefs and their connections. That is, an agent’s rationality is exclusively about one’s beliefs and its ordering. An agent’s epistemic characteristics like rationality are defined solely in relation to his/her beliefs. Taylor notes that such a notion of rationality and of certainty play a decisive role in shaping the idea of ‘human agency’ or ‘subject’ of the modern age.

The picture of the ‘disengaged agent’ follows from such a picture of the human subject. The subject is ideally disengaged, that is, free and rational to the extent that he fully distinguishes himself from the natural and social worlds so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside the agent. Such a notion gives rise to the powerful moral ideal of modern period: to be good is to rely on ourselves and on our beliefs and on our judgement. This ideal of self-responsibility is the foundational stone of modern culture.
Taylor notes that many important critics of Cartesian epistemology, remain strong advocates of the implications of Cartesian Epistemology and this is because they failed to comprehend the representational thesis of Cartesian Epistemology in its depth. Taylor point out that Husserl is one of the important figures of the phenomenological movement who gave rise to various unconventional and radical thoughts in philosophical debates, but yet remains a captive of representationalist thesis of modern epistemology. Taylor says that Husserl who delinked himself from many epistemological theses of modern philosophy emerges as strong advocates of its ethical implications. Taylor cites Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* to argue that Husserl holds firmly the Cartesian Moral Ideal.

Cannot the disconsolateness of our philosophical position be traced back ultimately to the fact that the driving forces emanating from the *Meditations* of Descartes have lost their original vitality - lost it because the spirit that characterizes radicalness of philosophical self-responsibility has been lost? Must not the demand for a philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice, shaping itself with actual autonomy according to ultimate evidences it has itself produced and therefore absolutely self-responsible-must not this demand, instead of being excessive, be part of the fundamental sense of genuine philosophy? (Husserl, Edmund.1982:5-6).

Taylor elaborates the position as follows: “The ideal of self-responsibility is foundational to modern culture. It emerges not only in our picture of the growth of modern science through the heroism of the great scientist, standing against the opinion of his age on the basis of his own self-responsible certainty-Copernicus, Galileo (he wobbled a bit before the Holy Office, but who can blame him?), Darwin, Freud. It is also closely linked to the modern ideal of freedom as self-autonomy.” (Taylor, Charles. 1995:7)
Moreover, Taylor considers that though Husserl’s phenomenological analysis poses serious threat to many epistemological theses, his mode of philosophy is well within the defined boundaries of Cartesian epistemology. Husserl’s formulation of ‘Transcendental Subjectivity’ and ‘Transcendental Reduction’ are well inspired by Descartes’ methodologies. One of the several ways to ‘Transcendental Reduction’ is ‘Cartesian Way’. Cartesian way of Husserl’s ‘Transcendental reduction’ is inspired by Descartes’ methodological doubt. Husserl claims that it is possible to conceive the existence of a worldless subject, whereas it is not possible to conceive the existence of a subjectless world. Thus, Husserl claims that transcendental subjectivity which is basically a worldless subject is the transcendental condition of human experience.

Whereas the objective world (understood as the coherent and rational organization of our intentional correlates) necessarily presupposes an intentional subject, the reverse is not the case. Whereas the world can only appear for a subject, subjectivity does not need the world in order to be. The world, and more generally, every type of transcendence, is relative insofar as the condition for its appearance lies outside itself, namely, in the subject. In contrast the subject, the immanence, is absolute and autonomous since its manifestation only depends upon itself. (Zahavi, Dan.2003:48).

Thus, it is clear Husserl holds the position that subjectivity is autonomous. Such a characterization of subjectivity is very well compatible with representationalist framework. Taylor characterizes one of the core tenets of representationalism as follows: “...these states (the ideas) are self-enclosed, in the sense that they can be accurately identified and described in ‘abstraction’ from the “outside” world (this is of course, essential to the whole rationalist thrust of reflexive testing of the grounds of knowledge)...” (Taylor, Charles.1995:9). Indeed, Husserl never spoke of ‘Ideas’. He does not subscribe to Cartesian atomism. He considers phenomena as
indivisible and at the same time he believes that subjective experience can be abstracted from what it is about (i.e. from reality).

Thus, Husserl’s phenomenology falls within the boundary of representationalism. According to Taylor, the second core tenet of representationalism is the following: the ideas point towards and represent things in the outside world. Taylor interprets Husserl’s theory of intentionality as a version of the second representationalist tenet.

There are various interpretations of Husserl’s theory of intentionality. It seems Taylor adopts the interpretation which views Husserl’s theory of intentionality as a meditational theory. A conscious experience or act is directed towards an object through an intentional entity which is called ‘Noema’. Here, Husserl’s notion of ‘Noema’ (the object-as-it is intended) is considered as mental representation. ‘Noema’ is the object-as-it-is intended, for example, I can consider ‘Pratibha Patil’ as the ‘President of India’ or as ‘Mother of a person’. Here I am intending the object called ‘Pratibha Patil’ as the President of India. That is why often Noema is considered as the meaning of the conscious act/experience. But, the much debated question is the relation between ‘object-as-it is intended’ and the object-that-is intended.

According to West coast interpretation (the interpretations of Follesdal, Dreyfus, Miller Smith and McIntyre)

…the noema must be sharply distinguished from both act and object. It is an ideal meaning or sense which mediates the intentional relation between act and object. Thus, and very importantly, the noema is not taken to be that toward which consciousness is directed, but that by means of which it is directed, and by virtue of which we achieve a reference to the external object. The decisive feature of the Fregean approach is, consequently, that the
intentionality of consciousness is conceived in analogy with the reference of linguistic expressions. In both cases the reference is determined by the sense, that is, in both cases the reference is effectuated via the sense. (Zahavi, Dan. 2003: 58-59)

Indeed Husserl’s phenomenology is representationalist as per the above interpretation. But, there are philosophers who counter such an interpretation.

In contrast, Sokolowski, Drummond, Hart, and Cobb-Stevens (often known as the East Coast interpretation) argue that intentionality is a fundamental feature of conscious experience, and they therefore deny what seems to follow from the mediator theory favoured by the West Coast interpretation, namely that the intentional directedness of the act is a function of the intentional nature of the meaning. In their view, the purpose of the *epoche* and reduction is not to replace the worldly objects with mental representations. After the reduction, we continue to be concerned with the worldly object, but we now no longer consider it naively, rather we focus on it precisely as it is intended and given, that is as a correlate of experience. (Ibid: 59).

Indeed, on the basis of East coast interpretation it is difficult to label Husserl as representationalist. But, it is clear that Taylor continues to hold Husserl as a representationalist. I think Taylor’s position can be justified as follows: though in Husserl’s writings, there are a number of anti-representationalist remarks, the implication of the Husserl’s philosophical articulations does not suggest a way out of the representationalist framework. If we hold the east coast interpretation, then both the realm of consciousness (mental realm) and realm of world/reality are inextricably linked because mental realm is essentially about reality. Taylor’s
position might be that the Husserl’s notion of intentionality itself is not sufficient to show that mental realm is enclosed. Without having a sufficient argument to claim the mental realm is not enclosed, Husserl’s position that mental realm is essentially about reality or world would remain as a slogan.

IV.2 Charles Taylor on Heidegger

Taylor states that Heidegger is the pioneer among philosophers who show a way out of the captivity of representationalism. Taylor notes that the basic form of the argument of Heidegger is the ‘argument from transcendental conditions’. Taylor states that Heidegger finds a way out of the Cartesian framework by exploring the conditions for the possibility of experience. Indeed, transcendental arguments originate from Kant, but Taylor notes, Kant’s formulations of the conditions of possibility of experience do not go beyond the mental realm. Thus, by formulating the conditions exclusively in mental terms, Kant’s approach fails to go beyond Cartesian framework. But Heideggerian formulation of transcendental conditions of human experience goes beyond the mental realm and thus goes beyond the Cartesian doctrine that knowledge is exclusively of mental states and its characteristics are determined by mental states. Thus, Taylor notes that Heidegger’s attempt to explore the transcendental conditions of knowledge undermines the entire Cartesian epistemological project. According to Cartesian epistemology, what we call ‘knowledge’ is our disengaged representation of reality. “Heidegger, for instance, shows-especially in his celebrated analysis of being-in-the-world-that the condition of our forming disengaged representations of reality is that we must be already engaged in coping with our world, dealing with the things in it, at grips with them.” (Taylor, Charles.1995:11)
Taylor points out that Heidegger’s Being-in-the world is a transcendental condition for our experience and even for disengaged experience. But the perennial question could be whether the condition, i.e., ‘being-in-the world’ is transcendental condition or only empirical condition of experience. If a particular condition is a transcendental condition of human experience, then we would not be able to conceive of human experience without such a condition. An empirical condition of human experience is a condition which just happens to be a condition of human experience. That is, in a certain sense, empirical conditions are not the necessary conditions of human experience. Human experience is possible even without the empirical conditions but in the current situation, they happen to be conditions of human experience.

The question is whether Heideggerian conditions are empirical or transcendental. If it is only an empirical condition, then it is not a matter of epistemic significance. Of course, phenomenon requires a ‘being’ since without a ‘being’ a phenomenon cannot even be conceived. Phenomenon means something which appears. Thus it is pointed out that ‘being’ is a necessary condition for the possibility of any phenomenon. However, this is what exactly Husserl claims through his transcendental reduction. A transcendental subject is a necessary condition for human experience. But Heidegger’s claim is much deeper than that. For Heidegger, it is not the mere ‘Being’ which is the transcendental condition of human experience, but ‘Being-in-the-world’, i.e., a being engaging with the world, dealing with things and coping with the world. For Heidegger, a being that is in relentless engagement with the world is the transcendental condition.

And the debating point is that, whether such a being who is in grip with the world is transcendental condition. We may not have much difficulty in accepting that such a being (being-in-the-world) is a part of empirical condition of our human experience or human
knowledge. Because currently we humans have knowledge claims or experience, we are engaged with the world. But the question is can we claim that, without such a being human experience is not possible.

Towards establishing that Heideggerian ‘Being-in-the world’ is not an empirical condition but a transcendental condition of human experience Taylor takes the first step by construing human experience as meaningful one. He argues that meaning of our experience comes along with the experience. That is, something appears to us as meaningful not that meaning is generated after experience. Taylor claims that experience comes to us as meaningful when one is well equipped with the intuitions about human experience whereas according to Cartesian account in meaningful experience, meaning comes subsequent to the experience and this, according to Heidegger and Taylor is counter intuitive and even inconceivable.

Thus, to uphold Heideggerian position, Taylor primarily argues that experience or appearance is meaningful one. Then Taylor claims the engaged agent (being-in-the-world) is a necessary condition for a meaningful experience. An agent could ascribe meaning to something only on the basis of certain prior understanding of world and ourselves. That pre-understanding of the world and ourselves constitutes the background in ascribing meaning to an experience. And apparently pre-understanding of our world necessarily involves our engagement with the world. And more importantly our body and our language are essential constituents of the pre-understanding realm.

Taylor holds that Heidegger’s condition of intelligibility of experience is the major ground of his critique of epistemology. The question is ‘How can we find certain experience as intelligible’? Cartesian epistemology’s answer is that input is intelligible when it is described in
terms of operations through which the input is processed. An input is unintelligible if it cannot be so processed. Taylor’s argument is that even if we adhere to such account of intelligibility, at best the account is only about the way intelligibility works. That is, we are making an experience intelligible through a certain kind of process. But it is hard to claim that the process is generating intelligibility. Taylor finds that such an account of intelligibility maintains the notion of intelligibility as an assumption. So what we need to explore is the conditions of intelligibility.

Taylor notes that the mechanistic account of intelligibility hits a dead end in front of the skeptical attacks. Cartesian epistemology explains the intelligibility in terms of causal relation. Input is causally connected and finally generates the intelligible experience. Causal relation or its process is considered as one which generates intelligibility. Then the question arisen that ‘How can causal relation is intelligible to an agent’? Thus, it is revealed that Cartesians do not have an account of intelligibility. Kant is significant in the philosophical tradition because, he attempts to explore the conditions of intelligibility for the first time in modern philosophical tradition. He argues that shaping of an experience by certain categories and faculties of mind generates an intelligible experience. Kant provides an explicit and articulate account of faculties of mind and categories. But a question can be raised: ‘How can we have an intelligible account of categories and faculties which are the necessary conditions of intelligibility?’ Taylor argues that this brings out the paradoxical nature of intelligibility. Conditions of intelligibility cannot be unearthed in explicit form. In a sense, total explicit formulation or explicit understanding of the conditions of intelligibility is bound to be incoherent one. Hence, Heidegger attempts to explore inexplicit and inarticulate conditions of intelligibility. The experience of an agent is shaped by one’s form of life and by bodily existence. That is, experience is essentially of engaged and embodied agent. Engaged agency is an agency whose experience is only made intelligible by being placed in the
context. The context stands as the unexplicated horizon. The background is what makes certain experiences intelligible to us. It makes us capable of grasping experience. “The paradoxical status of the background can then be appreciated. It can be made explicit, because we aren't completely unaware of it. But the expliciting itself supposes a background. The very fashion in which we operate as engaged agents within such a background makes the prospect of total expliciting incoherent. The background can't in this sense be thought of quantitatively at all.” (Taylor, Charles. 1995:70)

Taylor clarifies Heidegger’s position that even the disengaged stance of an agent to the world necessarily pre-supposes an engaged agent (being-in-the-world). “Even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents. Even to find out about the world and formulate disinterested pictures, we have to come to grips with it, experiment, set ourselves to observe, control conditions. But in all this, which forms the indispensable basis of theory, we are engaged as agents coping with things. It is clear that we couldn’t form disinterested representations any other way.” (Ibid: 11). Thus, Taylor’s articulation of Heidegger’s view successfully defends the position that an engaged being (being-in-the-world) is transcendental condition of human experience.

Taylor proceeds to show how Heideggerian formulation of transcendental condition of human experience undermines the Cartesian epistemological tradition. Taylor finds that Heidegger’s notion of ‘Being-in-the-world’ primarily under-cuts one of the prestigious thesis of Cartesian epistemology, that is, foundationalism. Roughly the foundationalist position is the following: our belief or hypothesis can be justified by drawing a connection with something called ‘basic belief’ or ‘facts’ or ‘evidence’ etc. So, if we assume that our knowledge system or
belief system as a structured one then at the bottom of the structure is foundational beliefs which support the entire belief system.

The common criticism to foundationalism is against the claim of indubitable nature of basic beliefs. That is, as per foundationalism basic beliefs do not need any further justification. The basic beliefs are self-justificatory or self-evident. Critics of the Cartesian tradition often question that the self-evident nature of our so-called basic beliefs. The problem of foundationalism is that, once the basic beliefs are deprived of self-evident nature then we can see that the basic beliefs themselves have to rely up on some other beliefs. And that belief needs to be dependent up on something else. Thus an infinite-regress is the result of the attempt of justification. Taylor’s attack on foundationalism is based on Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world. Taylor tries to attack the very notion of foundation itself in the knowledge system. Taylor’s point is that there is no articulated or definite foundation for our knowledge system. Our beliefs about the world or representation of things are basically grounded in the way which we deal with things. When we perceive or when we form a belief, we are crucially dependent up on the way which we are linked with the world. The way which we deal with our world is inarticulate and non-explicit.

Foundationalism is undermined because you can’t go on digging under our ordinary representations to uncover further, more basic representations. What you get underlying our representations of the world—the kinds of things we formulate, for instance, in declarative sentences—is not further representation but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it. This shows the whole epistemological construal of knowledge to be mistaken. It doesn’t just consist of inner pictures of outer reality, but grounds in something quite other. And in this “foundation,” the
crucial move of the epistemological construal - distinguishing states of the subject (our “ideas”) from features of the external world - can’t be effected. (Taylor, Charles. 1995:11-12).

The crux of Heidegger’s critique of epistemology is the conception of engaged and embodied agency. Taylor holds that development of Heideggerian argument is through the deployment of transcendental argument which is ultimately derived from Kant. Taylor characterizes the transcendental argument as follows: “The arguments I want to call "transcendental" start from some feature of our experience which they claim to be indubitable and beyond cavil. They then move to a stronger conclusion, one concerning the nature of the subject or the subject’s position in the world.” (Ibid: 20). So, the point is that transcendental argument starts from certain indubitable fact about experience. Till Kant from this indubitable fact we attempt to infer forward. That is on the basis of indubitable fact we build other hypothesis or theories; that is the approach of foundationalism. Transcendent argument infer backward from the indubitable facts of experience. In transcendental argument philosophers infer necessary condition of indubitable facts.

Kant’s claims that unity of experience, or representation is an indubitable fact. Then Kant explores what should be the necessary characteristics of subject so that the unity of experience is rendered possible. Taylor argues that, transcendental argument plays a crucial role in the construction of the philosophical argument of twentieth century. And certain arguments of later Wittgenstein too can be understood in a better way, if those arguments are constructed in the mould of ‘Transcendental arguments’. Taylor notes that such claims could be controversial but understanding of Heidegger’s argument in the mould of transcendental philosophy is less controversial and more appropriate.
The conclusion of Heidegger’s transcendental argument is that ‘the agent or subject of experience or knowledge’ is essentially an embodied agent, engaged with the world. We have seen that Taylor’s main attempt is to show that ‘the embodied and engaged agent’ is not mere empirical condition of knowledge. Instead, it is a transcendental condition of knowledge. In order to counter the point that embodied agent is only an empirical condition of knowledge, Taylor analyses the point in detail. Consider the following case: we need an eye for the visual perception of the world. For the knowledge of visually available facts of the world the body part called ‘eye’ is needed. In that sense, most part of our body is needed for the acquisition of knowledge of the world. But in all above the situation, body is only an empirical condition of knowledge. Suppose I have perception of a tree. With the knowledge of the current situation of my body, I know that one condition for the visual perception of tree is eye. But by analysing the very nature of visual perception, I cannot conclude that ‘eye’ is a necessary condition of our experience. That is, another situation is conceivable where we have visual perception even without the aid of eye.

So Taylor’s point is that such kind of characterization of body as a condition of knowledge does not suggest that body is a transcendental condition. Heideggerian characterization of body and its relation to the world is radically different from the above characterization. “It is a claim about the nature of our experience and thought, and of all those functions which are ours qua subject, rather than about the empirically necessary conditions of these functions. To say we are essentially embodied agents is to say that it is essential to our experience and thought that they be those of embodied beings.” (Ibid: 22)

Charles Taylor considers that Heidegger’s attempts as much worthy initiative as it is the first concrete attempt to get rid of us from the grip of representationalism. The challenge which
Heidegger raises to modern epistemology is a remarkable one. Taylor’s critique of epistemology has been much influenced by Heidegger’s notion of engaged agency and the background. Of course modern epistemologists also talks about the agency, but, in modern epistemology agent is a thinking agent. The conception that the agent is a thinking agent/subject is one of the dominant concepts of modern era. Taylor comments that Heidegger does not want to deny the fact that we are a thinking being/thinking subject. But the problem arises when treat Human being primarily as thinking agent. Heidegger’s position is that the primary mode of being is its engagement with the world and the thinking or rational agent is only a derivative of the primary mode which he called ‘Being- in –the- World’.

One of the major problems Heidegger finds in modern epistemology is the ontologisation the rational procedure. Dualism is the ontology of the Cartesian Epistemology. And the whole modern epistemology crumbled under the weight of dualism. Taylor notes that the attempt of modern epistemology is to explain human’s engagement with the world. But modern epistemology starts from the basic premise which contradicts its thrust, namely, the human activities are essentially mental which are ontologically distinct from the world or reality. Thus the ontologisation of the modern philosophy’s rational procedure implies that there are two worlds: mental and physical world. But Phenomenologists point out that such an idea is highly unintuitive and cannot find any support from experience.

Traditional epistemologists try to avoid the fact that man is an engaged being. Instead of engaged agency traditional epistemologists bring the notion of disengaged agency. Heidegger’s whole philosophy is to try to make us aware of the role of engaged agency in producing knowledge and try to rid us of the myth of disengaged agency. The point Heidegger wants to put forward is that when we talks about knowledge claim we should have to consider the agent’s
form of life, history and bodily existence. Heidegger holds that our experience and knowledge is shaped by our bodily constitution/ cultural history/ form of life. But Heidegger finds that traditional epistemology is least concerned about this.

IV.3 Charles Taylor on Merleau Ponty

Taylor considers Merleau Ponty’s position to be the culmination of the philosophical pursuit to overcome representationalist epistemology. As we have discussed earlier, representationalist position is that we get knowledge through some inner entities called ideas, beliefs or propositions and these inner entities are self-enclosed one and yet point out towards the outer world. Taylor finds that representationalism is an amalgam of two such incoherent positions. Because of their self-enclosed nature, belief system cannot point towards external world. Taylor argues that if our beliefs or claims point or refer towards an outer world then that implies those systems are not enclosed ones. But till Heidegger, it was not clear what it means by saying that our belief system is not self enclosed one. Heidegger’s intervention shows that transcendental condition of our beliefs or knowledge is an engaged agent who is in grip with the world.

Heidegger argues that our beliefs are referring towards the world and the act of referring to the world presupposes that belief system is not a self-enclosed system. Heidegger was exploring the condition of intentionality. Heidegger points out that the necessary condition of an agent is the engagement with the world. Merleau Ponty shows that the embodied agent is a necessary condition for a meaningful experience. Taylor argues that critics like Heidegger and Merleau Ponty shows that features of us as knowing agent provide the justification of our knowledge claim, not some indubitable foundations of knowledge which is only an illusion.
Features of the knowing agent as embodied and engaged one characterizes the conditions of knowing and thus constitute the justification of our knowledge too.

Merleau Ponty’s attempt is to show the agent as an embodied one constitutes the conditions of knowing and thus constitute the justification of knowing too. Taylor elucidates Merleau-Ponty’s point as follows: Consider the following instruction given to a boy. ‘Johnny, go into the room and tell me whether picture is crooked.’ He went and checked the belief. Suppose that he formed, a belief that picture is not crooked. What justifies his view of the matter? Merleau Ponty’s point is that justification comes from the understanding or awareness of an agent, our awareness of the embodiment of agent. Suppose we ask a person to check whether the line which is drawn on the top of sidewall is straight or not. Suppose that the sidewall is too high and the person whom we assigned is very short and assume that the person reported that the line is straight. But probably we would not consider the claim as justified one. Because, we assume that person does not have the ‘Maximum grip’ or ‘Hold’ on the object, that is, precisely because the nature of the agent’s embodiment.

Merleau Ponty finds that the embodiment of the agent is crucial factor for belief formation about the world. Agent is not merely recording the world but instead engaging with the world. Engaging here means that the agent is situating himself/herself in the world in a particular fashion. Suppose agent is situated in another way, standing on a ladder or a table. Then the agent is having another kind of engagement with the world. Therefore, obviously our justification of a particular belief crucially considers or takes in to account how the agent is engaged with the world. And the second point is that our engagement with the world is crucially dependent upon our embodiment. So our awareness about agent’s embodiment plays crucial role in the justification of the knowledge claim. Agent engages with the world through his/her
embodiment. The embodiment shapes the engagement. When he talks about embodiment, Merleau Ponty tries to convince us that embodiment involves much more than the size and shapes of the body. Taylor elucidates Merleau Ponty’s position with his example as follows:

What is assumed when we give the order is that Johnny knows, as most of us do, how to form a reliable view of this kind of matter. He knows how to go and stand at the right distance and in the right orientation to get what Merleau Ponty calls a “maximum grip” or “hold” (prise) on the object. What justifies Johnny’s belief is his knowing how to do this, his being able to deal with objects in this way, which is, of course, inseparable from the other ways he is able to use, manipulate, get around among them, and so on. (Taylor, Charles.2004:30)

So, when we justifies Johnny’s claim, it involves our understanding/awareness that Johnny knows how to do the looking or how to stand in front of that. So our awareness of his ability to deal with objects plays a crucial role in our justification of Johnny’s beliefs.

Suppose a clock is placed upside down. And we asked a person to check the time. Simply because the clock is placed in upside down manner, we will not disbelieve the person’s claim. It is because we assume that the person’s ability to look the object right way. Taylor notes that “When he goes and checks he or she uses this multiple ability to cope; his sense of his ability to cope gives him confidence in his judgment as he reports it to us” (Ibid:30)

“Heidegger has taught us to speak of our ability to get around as a kind of “understanding” of our world, and indeed, drawing a sharp line between this implicit grasp on things and our form articulated, explicit understanding is impossible. It is not only that any frontier is porous, that thing s explicitly form articulated and
understood can “sink down” into unarticulated know-how, in the way that Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus have shown us with learning, that our grasp on things can move as well in the other direction, as we articulate what was previously just lived out. It is also that any particular understanding of our situation blends explicit knowledge and unarticulated know how.”(Taylor, Charles.2004:32).

Taylor notes that concrete and articulate argument for the claim of embodied agent as a transcendental condition of knowledge comes from Merleau Ponty. Merleau Ponty’s argument for the embodied agent is based on the nature of perception. Perception of the world necessarily implies (through the transcendental method) that agent of perception is of an embodied and engaged agent. Taylor claims that such an argument based on perception is quite valid. That is because perception is most basic to a subject.

...The one way of having a world which is basic to all this is my perceiving it from where I am, with my senses, as we say. This is basic, first because it is always there, as long as I am aware at all; and second because it is the foundation of other ways of having a world. We can ponder distant events, or theoretical perspectives on things, because we are first of all open to a world which can be explored, learned, theorized about, and so on. And our primary opening to this world, the inescapable background to all others, is through perception.(Taylor, Charles. 1995:23)

So, Merleau Ponty’s claim is that embodied agent is a necessary condition of the perception which we have. To proceed with his transcendental argument, Merleau Ponty first identifies one of the indubitable facts of our perception: the orientation structure of perceptual field. Merleau Ponty primary point is that our perception is characterized by a field or horizon
called as perceptual field. Perceptual field is not like a boundary which draws clear end lines to perception. In a sense, perception constitutes an open ended area. His point is that perception has an orientational structure. That is, perceptual field can be characterized as positioned in certain spatial relation. That is the field has foreground, a background and up and down. Suppose, I perceive a tree, in a distant way: one can characterize the road in front of tree as foreground, and bushes and others as its background, and the ground of the tree as down side and the sky as the upside of my perceptual field. Taylor’s point is that orientational structure is the essential constituent of the perceptual field; that is, “it cannot lose this structure without ceasing to be a perceptual field in the full sense, our opening onto a world. In those rare moments where we lose orientation, we don't know where we are; and we don't know where or what things are either; we lose the thread of the world, and our perceptual field is no longer our access to the world, but rather the confused debris into which our normal grasp on things crumbles.” (Ibid:23)

Merleau Ponty’s point is that an embodied agent is a necessary condition for having an orientational structure in our perception. Orientational structure is of an embodied agent and it cannot have orientational structure without an embodied agent. Taylor beautifully elucidates Merleau Ponty’s claim that embodied agent is a necessary condition of an orientational structure. One simple way to relate our body to the orientational structure is to say that up side of the field is where my head is and down side is where my feet is. But Taylor is not satisfied by drawing such relation with body and the orientational structure. Suppose I am standing upside down position. Then up side of the perceptual field is not necessarily in the direction of my head. It could be in the direction of my feet and same is the case when I am lying down or in bending position. Moreover, it is not the case that up and down side of perceptual field can be determined by a certain objects like sky, earth (ground) etc, though it could be the case that in certain case
they could be upside field or down side field of perception. But his point is that they are not
determining factors. “Rather up and down are related to how one would move and act in the
field… it is structured as a field of potential action... our perceptual field has the structure it has
because it is experienced as a field of potential action. We perceive the world, in other words, or
take it in, through our capacities to act in it.” (Taylor, Charles. 1995:23-24) Perception
necessarily requires an orientational structure. Orientational structure is the direction of our
action and stance. And action and stance of an agent necessarily require an embodied agent.

Taylor finds that Merleau Ponty’s theory of perception is a radical departure from sense-
data theory of perception in particular and Cartesian epistemology in general. Taylor notes that
through his theory of perception Merleau Ponty promoted the agenda of anti-representation set
by Heidegger. As we have seen, the key point of Heidegger’s critique is that our beliefs, our
knowledge claims are firmly rooted in the agent who engages the world in a particular fashion.
And the realm of engagement mainly consists of self-awareness and our awareness of the world
including the knowledge of how to do. The realm of engaged agent is basically inarticulate and
inexplicit. So, Heidegger’s point is that explicit and definite knowledge of an agent is based on
inarticulate and inexplicit pre-understanding.

Heidegger mainly characterizes the pre-understanding as our ability to do certain things
and knowledge of how. Our ability and our knowledge of dealing with the objects basically
constitute our pre-understanding. As Taylor notes, Merleau Ponty’s main contribution to the
critique of epistemology lies in specifying the realm of pre-understanding in a more precise
manner. One major point is that his account shows that background (the realm of pre-
understanding) is necessarily for any knowledge claim or belief. The necessity of the role of the
background is introduced by him through his theory of perception which is linked to his account
of intentionality. According to Husserl’s theory of intentionality, our conscious acts or experience or beliefs are directed towards an object. Merleau Ponty states that we are directed towards an object as being in front of something else or as behind of some other objects. So, the point of Merleau Ponty’s intentionality doctrine is that in our belief or perception we are directed towards an object against a particular background. But it is not merely that agent perceives an object along with its background, that is, perceive both object and background. Instead we perceive an object with its background. That is, we perceive an object in a very complex relation with its background. So, if the object remains the same and only the background changes, we will have completely different perception or belief about the object. So while drawing the conditions of intentionality, Heidegger formulates ‘engaged agent’ as a condition. While doing the same, Merleau Ponty characterizes the background of an object as necessary component of it being an intentional object to an agent. That is an agent’s directedness towards an object necessarily implies that object is described or portrayed or directed against a particular background. Then Taylor points out that Merleau Ponty’s account characterize the ‘background’ as a necessary condition of human experience. According to Taylor, Merleau Ponty’s intentionality thesis captures the essential structure of lived experience. According to Taylor, Merleau Ponty counters modern epistemology mainly by characterizing experience as meaningful not as treating meaning as a derivative of experience, but treating background as field of meaning.

In the Cartesian framework the conscious experience is considered as a natural phenomenon. Like any other phenomenon, conscious experience too is considered as a phenomenon which is causally produced. In a sense, experience is taken to be nothing but a chain of casually related entities called external object, sense organs and neutral system (brain).
Taylor identifies himself with Merleau Ponty’s critique that such an account falsifies the lived experience. He also supports Merleau Ponty’s claim that experience is a meaningful phenomenon. It is not that experience derives meaning from some analysis or account, instead it is itself a meaning generating activity. That is, Merleau Ponty’s point is that meaning of experience is not derivative. Instead, it is originary or primordial.

Taylor’s critique of epistemology is largely based on the argument of Heidegger and Merleau Ponty which is interpreted in the mould of a transcendental argument. But Taylor is very cautious in claiming what these transcendental arguments establish. As we have seen our perception and knowledge claims are essentially of an engaged and embodied agent. Taylor notes that from this point we may be tempted to draw an ontological thesis that ‘We are in fact embodied subject’. Taylor notes that such an ontological thesis is not supported by transcendental argument. Such claim evades the caution of Kant that transcendental argument does not establish anything about things-in-themselves. That is, by employing transcendental argument, we cannot claim that there exists an entity called human body. “What is shown is that our thought, our experience, and in general our function as subjects must be described as essentially the thought or experience of embodied agents. This says something about the nature of our life as subjects. It says, for instance, that our experience is constituted by our sense of ourselves as embodied agents.” (Taylor, Charles.1995:26)

And the other major question is ‘How these arguments establish their conclusions’? Taylor outlines three important features of the transcendental argument. The first point is that it is a chain of indispensability claims. We argue towards conclusion from starting point that the conclusion is necessary condition for the happening of the feature from which we have started. That is, the conclusion is indispensable for starting point. Consider Merleau Ponty’s argument,
and assume the perception as starting point. Merleau Ponty argues that orientational structure is indispensable for perception. That orientational structure of perception is thus established and then that is considered as the starting point and from that starting point we argue that, embodied agent is indispensable for the orientational structure.

Kant’s transcendental argument too can be shown as string of indispensability claims. For Kant, the primary staring point is the indubitable feature of the experience namely, its unity. For Kant, the indubitable feature of experience is that experience must have an object, and that is experience must be about something. From this starting point, Kant infers experience must be coherent. Then Kant explores necessary conditions of coherence or unity of experience. Thus he concludes coherent experience is possible only if we understand experience as shaped by certain categories. And the applicability of categories is considered as indispensible for coherent experience. The point Taylor attempts to argue is that transcendental argument is a chain of indispensability claims.

The second feature of transcendental argument is that indispensability claim is an \textit{a priori} valid one because in transcendental argument what we are doing is drawing a necessary connection between starting point and a conclusion. Necessary connection cannot be an empirical grounded one; it can be validated only on \textit{a priori} ground. And third important point which Taylor points out is that, the indispensability claims ultimately concerns about experience. What we have pointed out earlier is that transcendental argument is a chain of dispensability claims. One conclusion is dependent upon another position and that position is derived from something else. So, the argument goes like chain. But to be valid, the chain of indispensability claims has to be linked with a point which is indubitable. So ultimately all transcendental
arguments are based on some indubitable feature of experience. So, transcendental arguments are chain of apodictic indispensability claims concerning experience.

Taylor analyses the claim that transcendental arguments are *a priori* grounded or self-evident. Taylor’s position is that apodictic claim of transcendental argument need to be analyzed very carefully. He points out that in Kant’s transcendental argument the claims are not self-evident or apodictic certain. At best, what can be considered certain is only Kant’s starting point “It may seem clear that experience must have an object and must be coherent. But it is not at all clear that this coherence must be that of the applicability of the categories, and even less dear that the particular categories as Kant formulates them are the ones indispensably applicable” (Ibid: 33) So, Taylor’s crucial point about transcendental arguments is that the validity of the argument is *a priori* grounded, not empirical so. Taylor maintains that Kant’s transcendental argument nevertheless fails to achieve certainty and *a priori* ground. But Merleau Ponty’s and Heidegger’s transcendental arguments are substantially different from Kant’s argument on this count. Taylor’s position is that if transcendental arguments are based on articulating an insight or point of an activity, then certainty can be brought back into the picture. The insight of an activity is not a verbal matter, it is not what we talk about an activity. Certain things are essential for the activity and in the absence of them, the activity cannot be made out. Agent must have an understanding about an activity but need not be an exhaustive one. Consider the activity of writing or walking or cycling or swimming. While doing these activities, we have some understanding of these activities, but most part of the activities we are doing without any conscious understanding of it. But still the agent must have some grasp of what he/she is doing. And the grasp that the agent has is not a meta-reflection of the activity.
Taylor’s point is that through transcendental argument what we establish is that one factor is a necessary condition of experience. For Example, Kant argues that the application of categories is a necessary for experience. Merleau Ponty argues that orientational structure and being embodied are necessary for perception. While claiming that one factor is necessary for experience, they are basically pointing out that the factor is constitutive of experience. For example, our sense of ourselves as embodied agents is constitutive of experience or as Kant argues categories are constitutive experiences. But Taylor’s point is that Kant fails to show with certainty that categories are constitutive experience. But Merleau Ponty is able to show with certainty that embodied agent is constitutive experience.

Merleau Ponty was trying to shed light on an activity, not as a mental phenomenon. Of course, Kant too was trying to make a point about experience. But Kant does not consider experience as a kind of activity as Merleau Ponty and Heidegger envisage. Kant considers experiences as purely a mental phenomenon.

Taylor notes if our transcendental arguments are about an activity, then the point of an activity can be established with certainty through transcendental argument. Activity has certain constituent factors. For example rule of chess are constituent elements of chess playing. Taylor argues that agent’s awareness of those constituent factors is also a constituent factor of the activity. Without that awareness, the activity cannot be considered as an activity in its true sense. Taylor cites the example of chess. His point is that without knowing the conditions or constituent factors of chess (that is its rules) one cannot play chess. My awareness of the constituent factors or rule is necessary constituent of that activity. Taylor elucidates it as follows. Suppose two children who are not aware of the rule of the chess are moving pieces in chess board by copying the movements of other two players. Though children move exactly as players move, children’s
moving of chess pieces cannot be considered as chess play because children are not aware of the
game and its rules. An agent’s grasp of an activity is necessary constituent of that activity. From
this point, Taylor argues that here we have a judgment which is certain. When I am playing chess
I can claim with certainty that I know the rules of the chess because, my awareness of the rule is
the part of the very nature of the game called ‘chess’. “Thus, once we are playing chess, we
know with unquestionable certainty that this rule is a constitutive rule. Or otherwise put, we
couldn't doubt this without doubting that we are playing chess. You can't play chess and not
know this” (Taylor, Charles.1995: 29) Taylor’s point is that our grasp of an activity while doing
that activity is irrefutable. While speaking English, I cannot doubt that whether I speak English.
Then Taylor proceeds to claims that the perception is an activity and the grasp we have in the
perception is irrefutable. Perception is an activity of being aware of the world and my awareness
of reality or world cannot be refuted. Indeed, still we could dispute what we are aware of, in
perception- whether it is an external objects or appearance. But Taylor’s point is that but my
awareness of something cannot be doubted.

The chain of indispensability claims anchors here in something unchallengeable. I
may hyperbolically doubt whether my memory of chess playing is not a confused dream,
which will turn out incoherent if I dwell on it, as so many dreams do. I may doubt whether
I am "truly" aware, of ultimate reality, that is. But I cannot formulate a coherent doubt
whether I ’m aware in the sense of conscious, awake, and grasping something.
Transcendental arguments articulate indispensability claims concerning experience as
such.(Ibid: 31)

Taylor’s account of Merleau Ponty’s argument is mainly intended to explore the wider
scope of Merleau Ponty’s positions in the context of a critique of Cartesian Epistemology.
Obviously Merleau Ponty account can be considered as a direct attack against Cartesian account of perception and knowledge, especially of atomistic sense-data theory of perception. But Taylor’s interpretation recapitulates Merleau Ponty’s argument as a way out of representationalist framework.

However, Taylor’s account criticizes Merleau Ponty for carrying over the paradoxical idea of phenomenology, especially of Husserl’s phenomenology. Taylor argues that presuppositionless description which is the core idea of Phenomenological Philosophy sounds paradoxical in Merleau Ponty’s philosophy. The core idea of phenomenological description is the pure description of experience. That is, to describe experience in its own terms. That is, experience cannot be reduced to any other category which is extraneous to experience. And the famous phenomenological method *epoche* is for bracketing out of everything that does not belong to originary experience. Taylor calls the idea of pure description of experience as inherently paradoxical. Taylor points out that the idea of pure-description’ of experience implies that experience has a self-authenticating vocabulary. That is experience has its own vocabulary or descriptive tool and the validity of its vocabulary or its description is endorsed by itself. Taylor notes, here arises the paradox. The focus of Merleau Ponty’s argument is that, our articulated and explicit experience and knowledge system is necessarily pre-supposes pre-predication, pre-objective world. That is, explicit knowledge system rests on inarticulate pre-predicate world. Taylor noticed that one who endorses the idea that experience is originally inarticulate and inexplicit talks of a description which exhaustively and erroneously captures the experience. That is, what Taylor consider as paradoxical trouble which Merleau Ponty faces. Taylor further argues that “It follows that (from the idea of pure description of experience) no description is ever immune from revision, a point affirmed by Merleau Ponty himself when he
writes that ‘no phenomenological description is ever complete’. But if descriptions of original experience are never complete, if they are always revisable in the light of a further phenomenological reduction, then no description of original experience is ever really pure.” (Smith, Nicholas H. 2002:32).

Thus, Taylor’s response to Merleau Ponty ends with a negative note despite the affinity between the views of the two. However, his response to Merleau Ponty is negative only to the extent Merleau Ponty’s analysis of experience remains close to that of Husserl. Taylor has not substantiated his position that Merleau Ponty’s idea of inarticulatedness of original experience is not a tangential one. Taylor’s criticism of Merleau Ponty gets blunted if Ponty’s idea of experience does not necessarily involve the concept of inarticulatedness at least in Husserlian sense. Of course, Husserl’s position, irrespective of its being antithetical to modern epistemology, is, for Taylor, a point of departure since Husserl’s theory swallows more of modern epistemology, in Taylor’s view, than it eschews. However, as we have seen, Taylor’s response to Heidegger and Merleau Ponty is by and large positive. This is because, according to Taylor the ideas of engaged subject and embodied subject are two pillars on which an effective critique of modern epistemology can stand. Of course, these two pillars get related in Taylor’s hand within his own framework which, as we have seen, in Chapter III is essentially hermeneutical framework whose central element is that the “embodied knowers are...engaged agents who learn about their environment initially through practical experience rather than detached contemplation. The surrounding world appears as a meaningful context in which individuals act, interact, and pursue their purposes (Abbey, Ruth.2004: 3)

This chapter sought to show how Charles Taylor responds to the critiques of modern epistemology put forth by his predecessors while working out his own critique.