

Introduction

Timely Meditations in an Untimely Mode – The Thought of Charles Taylor

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Several things mark Charles Taylor as a distinctive figure in the landscape of contemporary philosophy. Taylor has been publishing consistently and prolifically for over four decades and despite his retirement from McGill University some years ago, his intellectual energies continue unabated. He carries on writing, teaching, and addressing audiences across the world. As his magnum opus, *Sources of the Self*, indicates, Taylor draws on a wide range of western thinkers – both canonical and lesser known – in adducing his own approach to philosophical questions. He writes and speaks as easily in French or German as in English. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Taylor's work is its range of concerns. Even his critics would have to concede that Taylor has made significant contributions to debates across a wide spectrum of philosophical areas: moral theory, theories of subjectivity, political theory, epistemology, hermeneutics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and aesthetics. His more recent writings see him branching into the study of religion.

In a time of increasing academic specialisation, in the era of the *Fachidiot* as Nietzsche put it, Taylor's ability to contribute to philosophical conversations in all these areas distinguishes him as an untimely thinker. This feature of his thought can be characterised as untimely because the wide and widening span of his work means that he resembles the canonical thinkers of the western philosophical tradition more than he does most contemporary philosophers. Whatever the charges that can be levelled at them of sexism, racism, and/or ethnocentrism, figures like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche – the list is not intended to be exhaustive – all had something important to contribute to several departments of philosophical inquiry. Taylor, too, philosophises in this now untimely mode.¹

At the same time, there is something very timely about many of Taylor's contributions to philosophical debates: his interventions often seem to be sparked by dissatisfaction with the ideas that are dominant at the time, or at least with the ways in which problems are formulated. Taylor's attack on the

narrowness and rigidity of much modern moral theory, his critique of the atomism and proceduralism of rights thinking, his delineation of the new moral possibilities that have emerged with modernity, his analysis of the politics of recognition, and his insistence on the need for the social sciences to take self-interpretations into account in the explanation of behaviour, all appear in response to what he takes to be lacunae or distortions in the way these issues have been conceptualised.² Such direct engagement with the formulations of particular problems at particular times explains the sense one often has of Taylor's thinking beginning almost in media res: When we read his work we so often find ourselves plunged into the midst of a current debate. This lends his writing an immediacy and vitality that sets it apart from the more formal and detached tone of many other contemporary philosophers.

This blend of timely thinking and untimely mode raises the question of system in Taylor's thought. On the one hand, a thinker with something to say on a diverse range of philosophical questions might be expected to display a rigid, and possibly even predictable, consistency in response to different issues. On the other hand, one who so directly engages the debates of the day might understandably be more sporadic and targeted in his or her contributions. In Taylor's case we find neither tendency: instead he displays a consistency across philosophical areas that is not rigidly systematic. There is, as many of the chapters in this volume illustrate, considerable consonance among his various interventions in the different areas of philosophy. Yet he is flexible and responsive enough not to cleave to the dictates of any philosophical system in approaching specific issues.

TAYLOR AND THE HERMENEUTIC TRADITION

Taking a wide view of Taylor's thinking, Nicholas Smith situates it within the hermeneutical tradition of philosophy. In so doing, Smith introduces several of the themes and concerns taken up by the following contributors in more specific contexts. Smith's chapter traverses such a wide terrain because it is his contention that the importance of the human capacity to make meaning is a thread running through many elements of Taylor's thought.

Smith begins by outlining several meanings of the term hermeneutics but goes on to show the term's specificity when applied to Taylor's work. Taylor's interest in hermeneutics derives primarily from his philosophical anthropology: He can be classed as a hermeneutical thinker because of

his conviction that human beings are self-interpreting creatures. He thus follows Heidegger's lead in linking hermeneutics to ontology. Further examination of Taylor's philosophical anthropology shows hermeneutics to be central to his epistemology, too. This is because he views human knowledge as the product of engaged, embodied agency. Along with the influence of Heidegger, in this we see the powerful legacy of another twentieth-century continental thinker – Merleau-Ponty – for the development of Taylor's thought. (Merleau-Ponty's legacy for Taylor also comes through in the chapters by Dreyfus and Kerr.)

Taylor insists that knowledge is, in the first instance, the outcome of embodied existence and experience. The way we encounter the world cognitively is shaped and constrained by the fact that we are bodies. This gives us an initial perceptual orientation to the world that reflects the relative position of our sense organs both in our bodies and vis-à-vis the world. In the first instance, for example, we can only see things from certain angles but can change the angle from which we see something by moving our bodies or the object and so on. Of course the creation of ever more sophisticated tools has, over the centuries, enabled us to know things in ways that transcend these bodily limitations, but here Taylor is concerned with the fundamentals of knowledge, with knowledge in its most ontologically primitive condition. He argues, moreover, that these more sophisticated ways of knowing made possible through technology and/or scientific theory, are themselves embedded within and ultimately dependent on, this ontologically primitive mode of knowing. With the aid of her microscope, for example, the scientist might be able to see things unimaginable to the unaided eye, but in doing so she is still using this tool with her body, placing her eye just so, and so forth.

Such embodied knowers are also 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. Smith issues the important reminder that depicting knowledge as hermeneutic does not mean that it is necessarily conscious or articulate; interpretations can be tacit and prereflective. As such they typically form part of the taken-for-granted background of knowledge, there to be joined by what we might call postreflective knowledge – information and ideas that have been questioned or actively reflected on but which then become familiar and lapse into the taken for granted. This tacit background provides the backdrop against which items of knowledge or anomalies and puzzles can become objects of conscious interrogation. But as Taylor repeatedly emphasises,

the background itself cannot be turned into an object of reflection in this way. The existence of an unexamined background is the precondition for reflective knowing: In order for some things to be studied and examined, others must remain in place.

Taylor's view of humans as self-interpreting animals accords great importance to the place of language in human life. Just as his approach to epistemology makes embodied agency fundamental, so his account of language makes the human capacity for expression primary.³ Other more instrumental uses of language – for the purposes of effective communication, for example – abstract from, and are parasitic on, this foundational expressive capacity. In this connection, Smith explores Taylor's claim that the existence of the linguistic or semantic dimension highlights something unique in humans' relationship to language. The phrase "the semantic dimension" refers to the idea that there is a way of expressing things correctly that can be evaluated only by standards internal to expression itself. To express something rightly means more than simply transmitting information correctly. For example, the quest to find the apposite word or phrase to characterise emotions, experiences, or situations, places one within the semantic dimension of language. Several different expressions might suffice to relay information about what is being recounted but one will be more expressively correct than the others. And because language is partly constitutive of identity for Taylor, "getting it right" in these instances can affect and alter the way we interpret ourselves and others. Striving for a correct articulation in this way is, moreover, an ongoing process: Success in getting something right semantically is always provisional and the best characterisation can potentially be superseded by a yet better description of things.

Smith goes on to examine what ramifications Taylor's view of humans as self-interpreting animals has for ethics. For Taylor, strong evaluations are a necessary component of self-understandings: He believes that normally functioning adults hold some ethical values or ideals to be worthier and more important or more fundamental than others. Thus there is an inherently ethical component to hermeneutics when, as in Taylor's case, the hermeneutical inquiry focuses mainly on how we interpret ourselves. However, here again hermeneutics should not be conflated with conscious articulation; we can have understandings of ourselves that are subconscious or implicit or taken for granted. Yet because language is such an important component of human identity, we often strive to articulate our self-understandings. This is especially so when those understandings are challenged by others or when some turn of events prompts us to reexamine what had formerly been accepted without question.

Our self-interpretations are therefore structured on a vertical plane by strong evaluation, in the sense that these evaluations reflect a sense of what is of higher and lower ethical significance. Our self-interpretations are also structured on a horizontal plane, across time. Here again the presence of Heidegger can be felt, for Taylor adopts his *leitmotif* of humans as beings in time. According to Taylor, when we interpret ourselves, we see ourselves as beings with a past that can be remembered, reconstructed, and re-interpreted just as we imaginatively project ourselves and our purposes into the future.⁴ Taylor contends that as beings in time we naturally create a narrative interpretation of our lives. We see our lives as stories that unfold, and in which we move closer to or further away from different strongly valued goods and goals. Whether this characteristic deserves a place in an ontology of the human is, however, questionable in Smith's view.

TAYLOR'S (ANTI-) EPISTEMOLOGY

Some of the key elements of Taylor's epistemology that Smith notes are explored in more detail by Hubert Dreyfus. Dreyfus's article surveys some of Taylor's long-standing ideas about epistemology but brings them up to date by drawing on recent unpublished correspondence with Taylor on these questions. Taylor's belief that human knowledge is the product of engaged, embodied agency provides the starting point for Dreyfus's critical analysis of what he calls Taylor's anti-epistemology. This label makes sense if we take epistemology not in the wide sense, as referring to that subdiscipline of philosophy concerned with questions of knowledge, truth, and certainty, but in the more narrow sense of an approach to knowledge pioneered by Descartes. According to this narrower definition, epistemology treats questions of knowledge in a way that presupposes a series of mutually reinforcing dualisms such as subject/object, knower/known, mind/world and inside/outside. When the generation of knowledge is considered from within this framework, the key question becomes how the two sides of each pair are linked. What Taylor calls mediational epistemology provides an answer to this. As Dreyfus characterises it, "The radical gap between what is inside the mind and what is outside in the world must be mediated in order for a subject to have knowledge of the world, and epistemology is the study of this mediation" (see Chapter 2). When Taylor speaks of overcoming epistemology, he means going beyond, or perhaps beneath, this mediational view of knowledge to an understanding of knowledge as produced by engaged, embodied agents. However, his critique of epistemology

in this narrow sense is not directed at a purely historical conception of knowledge, for Taylor contends that some contemporary theorists are still imprisoned in this epistemological model, even when they claim to have overcome it.

Dreyfus discusses some of the salient questions arising from Taylor's views about knowledge by outlining where Taylor stands, considering some possible challenges to his position, and then deciding how fatal or otherwise these challenges are. The first such challenge Dreyfus engages is the "brain in a vat" argument. As Taylor sees it, one of the weaknesses of the mediational approach to knowledge is that it understands knowledge in an excessively intellectualist or mentalist fashion. Because of the mind/world separation that underpins it, it construes knowledge in terms of propositions in the mind that reflect the contents of the world more or less correctly. For Taylor, by contrast, the more primordial source of knowledge is, as we have seen, our active, involved coping with the world. Dreyfus wonders whether Taylor's stance here commits him to a sort of metaphysical realism, to a claim that the world outside the self exists independently of the knower. He explores this question by reference to the Cartesian-inspired "brain in a vat" scenario. Dreyfus asks whether Taylor's engaged, embodied agents of knowledge can be sure that they really are coping with an actually existing world or whether they could just be having an experience of coping. (Another shorthand Dreyfus adopts for this possibility is "*The Matrix* world" because in the film of this name experiences were generated and organised by an intelligent computer and supplied to brains which were in vats.) Is there room in Taylor's outlook for the possibility that the mind isn't really embodied or engaged with an external world but is just an entity located somewhere which receives the impression that it is so embodied and engaged? No matter how unlikely this scenario might be, the challenge is an important one because if Taylor can accommodate the mere possibility that the perceptions humans have of being engaged, embodied agents are false, he would have to concede that our experience of the world could be indirect and thus mediated. With such a concession, the distance he tries to establish between his position and the mediationalist approach would be reduced.

Dreyfus concludes that this does not pose such a challenge for Taylor after all. To support his view of knowledge generation, Taylor does not need to insist that embodied agents actually are coping with a real world. What matters most is their perception that they are. Yet with even the perception of embodied agency, any strong mind/world division is hard to sustain, because coping must be experienced as an unmediated interaction with

things. This is also a nonintellectualist approach to knowledge compared with the mediational view because the perception of actively coping with a world remains more fundamental to knowledge than do beliefs about that world.

Taylor advances a sort of realism when it comes to scientific knowledge, believing that science can lead us towards a true understanding of the way the natural world really is. This provides the basis for the second challenge Dreyfus entertains. This challenge emanates mainly from Richard Rorty who charges Taylor with being ensnared in the modern epistemological model because he continues to uphold a distinction between the world as it is for us and the world as it is in itself. From Rorty's perspective, this approach to knowledge is itself trapped within a false inner/outer dichotomy. Because of his Nietzschean conclusion that there is no knowledge of the world in itself, but only ever of the world for us, Rorty has been able to transcend this dichotomy. Can Taylor's claim that Rorty has not overcome epistemology be volleyed immediately back at Taylor by Rorty?

The belief that there is a difference between the world as it is and the world as it is for us seems particularly problematic for Taylor given his whole phenomenological insistence that we know the world through involved coping. This seems to privilege, if not claim exclusivity for, knowledge about the world as it is for us. Dreyfus gives the name of "deflationary realism" to the position that accepts that all we can know is the world as it is for us. Taylor, however, subscribes to a more robust and traditional realism, believing that it is possible to know the world as it is in itself, or at least to get closer to this sort of knowledge. Modern science is the vehicle that makes this increasing proximity possible. Its mechanisms make it possible for us to strive for a view from nowhere that allows us to see an independent reality in a disengaged way.

Yet rather than driving a wedge between Taylor's emphasis on the knowledge that comes from engaged coping on the one hand and his belief that some understandings of the world are truer than others on the other hand, the fundamental fact of coping provides a starting point for their reconciliation. Taylor suggests that when coping with the world, we develop a sense that there is a deeper reality that does not depend solely on the meanings we accord to it. This deeper reality sets limits or boundary conditions on the ways in which we can cope with it: When it comes to coping with the world, it is not a case that anything goes or thinking makes it so. There are structural realities to which we accommodate ourselves, not vice versa. And the more responsive to these realities we are, the better able are we to cope with the universe.

In the conclusion to his essay, Dreyfus wrestles with the question of whether Taylor's arguments on this topic can be squared with his cultural pluralism. Doesn't his belief that true scientific assertions isolate the essential properties of things as they are in themselves necessarily consign other cultures' ways of looking at these same things to falsehoods? One of the unique qualities of modern science is precisely its aspiration to give an account of the universe as it is in itself. Insofar as other cultures do not claim to be describing the essential properties of things, their depictions cannot be immediately weighed against those of modern science and found wanting. Such approaches do not fit neatly into the robust or deflationary realist dyad. Insofar as there is no direct contradiction between the essential properties as revealed by science and those attributed by another culture to the same entity, a pluralist would allow that both approaches can bring to light real aspects of that entity. Science may thus provide a true, but not therefore comprehensive or exhaustive, account of entities in the natural world. As Dreyfus says, Taylor can accept on the one hand that there is no single correct language for describing the universe, while holding on the other that there could be several true descriptions that correspond to various aspects of nature. Hence his depiction of Taylor's anti-epistemology as pluralistic robust realism.

THE SELF AND THE GOOD: CHARLES TAYLOR'S MORAL ONTOLOGY

An overview of some of the key moments in Taylor's thinking about ethics is provided by Fergus Kerr. The guiding concern of this overview is Taylor's attempt to transcend subjectivism or anthropocentrism in ethical thinking by adumbrating a moral ontology that makes room for sources of moral motivation and allegiance that are non- or extrahuman. In valuing certain things, people often feel that they are responding to the call of something bigger or higher than they. Kerr emphasises that in attempting this account of moral experience, Taylor is continuing the work of Iris Murdoch and her arguments about the sovereignty of good, for he paints a picture of the moral world in which individuals do not necessarily experience themselves and their choices as sovereign. (The question of Murdoch's legacy for Taylor's thought is also addressed in Melissa Orlie's chapter.) As Kerr points out, for Taylor a moral theory that transcends subjectivism in this way is more valuable than most modern moral theories which have gone to great lengths to deny or suppress this dimension of moral experience.

But as Kerr suggests, modern moral philosophies are not the only approaches to obscure and conceal what Taylor takes to be the realities of human experience. Returning to Taylor's first book, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, Kerr shows that even then Taylor strove to attack theories that departed too much from individuals' understandings of their ordinary experience. Although this early work was more obviously interested in questions of psychology and methodology, Kerr contends that issues about moral experience were never far from Taylor's mind. He reads Taylor as attempting to defend a sort of Aristotelean inspired philosophical anthropology against a naturalistic explanation of human behaviour which was modelled on the natural sciences.

Kerr points out that *The Explanation of Behaviour* contained the germs of one of Taylor's next important contributions to philosophical anthropology – his critique of atomism. Here Taylor takes aim at another distinctively modern doctrine. Just as any idea that the goods we value must be exclusively human creations would have been incomprehensible to the ancients, so the image of individuals as potentially self-sufficient entities for whom society fulfills primarily instrumental purposes is a creation of modern thought. In this case, too, Taylor draws inspiration from the ideas of Aristotle to argue for the importance of an obligation to restore and sustain the society and culture that make available the goods we affirm.⁵

With *Sources of the Self*, Taylor's views on the moral life and theories thereof receive their most obvious and sustained articulation. Kerr observes that in this work Taylor's method of defending a nonsubjectivist account of morality involves not so much detailed engagements with and critiques of subjectivist approaches as the construction of an historical narrative about how they came to dominate our thinking about ethics.⁶ Part of Taylor's purpose in recounting this narrative is to suggest that such a story cannot have a happy ending: Accounts of the moral life that occlude all references to and acknowledgements of the experience of transsubjective sources of the good are doomed to be unsatisfactory and incomplete.

Yet alongside this cultural-historical delineation of the goods that have developed in western modernity, there are certain values that Taylor sees as being common to all human beings. In discussing this aspect of Taylor's thought, Kerr shows us that here again there is a fusion of ethics and philosophical anthropology. "Certain moral reactions . . . display something fundamental about the nature and status of human being. Certain of our reactions turn out, as Taylor puts it, to be practical affirmations of an 'ontology of the human'" (Chapter 3). One of the central aspects of human

ethics drawn out of Taylor's work by Kerr is the desire to avoid unnecessary suffering in other human beings.

However, although the details about what is genuinely natural or intrinsic to humans can, as Kerr acknowledges, be contested, what cannot be gainsaid is the sheer unsuitability of approaches to ethics that are based on or inspired by the natural sciences. For Taylor it is inappropriate, and even destructive, to try to think about ethics in these disengaged or neutral ways – in ways that require us to prescind from our ordinary experience of the world. He has, perforce, to reach back to older approaches to the good that were not infected by the modern elevation of natural science as the paradigmatic form of knowledge. In order to understand moral life more fully we must, rather than attempting to bracket or negate our ordinary reactions and responses, engage more directly with them. This often involves trying to illuminate elements of our understanding that have fallen into the taken-for-granted background of our awareness. In this portion of his chapter, Kerr shows how the idea of the background plays a role in Taylor's ethics, just as Smith did in his discussion of epistemology. One of the things to be revealed by this process of disinterring elements of the background so as to make better sense of our experiences of ethical life is, to use the shorthand suggested by Kerr in his chapter, the profound sense humans have of the sovereignty of the good.

Although a conception of God is an obvious, and for Taylor important, instance of a nonanthropocentric source of the good, Kerr explores an alternative source based on Taylor's discussion of deep ecology. In this Taylor again takes some of his inspiration from Heidegger. We sense that some things, such as the natural environment and nonhuman animals, can make claims on us by virtue of their intrinsic worth. Conceding that Taylor's thoughts on this topic are tentative and exploratory, Kerr suggests that there is a possible paradox in finding inspiration in Heidegger for conceptions of human flourishing. A similar scepticism pervades the chapter's conclusion as Kerr problematises from a number of angles the priority Taylor accords to theism as a moral source.

TAYLOR'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Drawing on his expertise in contemporary political theory, Stephen Mulhall provides an account of some of Taylor's most important interventions in political philosophy. Mulhall recommends that these be seen as part of Taylor's larger attempt to promote articulation of the moral horizons of modernity.