Reviews

The New 'Public Order': Within and *Above*

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Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, by Charles Taylor, *Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. xii + 601 pp. $37.50.*

In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor is both guide and traveling companion on a long, rewarding journey through the history of Western philosophy. His purpose is to trace "various strands of our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a purpose, or a self." To be a purposeful agent is intimately bound up in turn with our views and perceptions of the moral. The latter encompasses not only the claims of others to justice, well-being, and dignity; it is also what makes our own lives meaningful or fulfilling. Such matters deserve "the vague term 'spiritual,'" says Taylor, because they involve "'strong evaluation', that is, they involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged." (3-4)

Moral intuitions not instinctive.

Some moral intuitions—such as the demand that we "respect the life, integrity, well-being, even flourishing, of others"—run so deep, Taylor writes, that we are tempted to think of them as instincts. Yet "this 'instinct,'" he notes, "receives a variable shape in culture.... And this shape is inseparable from an account of what it is that commands our respect. The account seems to articulate the intuition." On one side, our moral reactions are almost like instincts, similar to our love of sweet things or fear of falling. On the other, they "seem to involve

claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human."

Taylor observes that an important strand of modern naturalist thought has tried to ignore or dismiss this second side of morality as irrelevant or illusory. This contradicts general experience. While ontological accounts offer themselves as correct articulations of our "gut" reactions of respect, no one feels called upon to give analogous explanations of one's reaction to sweet or nauseous substances or extreme heights. "In either case," says Taylor, "our response is to an object with a certain property. But in one case the property marks the object as one *meriting* this reaction; in the other the connection is just a brute fact. Thus we argue and reason over what and who is a fit object of moral respect, while this doesn't seem to be even possible for a reaction like nausea." (4-6)

Exterior cosmic order.

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor provides a detailed and insightful rendition of the way competing ontological accounts have emerged in response to changing circumstances and shifting needs over the last 2,500 years. For Plato, and in a somewhat different way Aristotle, to attain goodness or the best life for man required attuning oneself to a rational cosmic order that existed outside of man and wholly independent of him. The love of this exterior cosmic order empowered men to order their own lives to the Good. The good life consisted in imitating this vision of a pre-existing, unchanging, external order of reality by subordinating one's passions to one's reason. Certain ways of life were seen as more nearly approximating the cosmic order of reality than others and therefore as higher or more dignified. On this scale the philosopher, who devotes his life to contemplation of the unchanging Good, is highest. The citizen, who acts to order the political life of the city-state, though less exalted than the philosopher, also participates in the order of the Good and therefore shares in the good life. By contrast, the mundane work of the household or of commerce, though providing the material necessities without which mere life would be impossible, does not itself partake of the good life.

"Life goods" and "constitutive goods."

To help clarify important aspects of man's moral experience, Taylor introduces several terms of art, including "life goods" and "constitutive goods." He notes that, in the context of Platonic philosophy, certain types of action and styles of life are seen as superior to others. Reason is superior to the passions, for instance, and the activity of the citizen more noble than that of the tradesman. Such qualitative dis-

tinctions between actions, or feelings, or modes of life, Taylor designates as "life goods" because the "goods which these define are facets or components of a good life." But superior to these "life goods" in Plato's philosophy is "a cosmic reality, the order of things"—"the Idea of the Good itself"—with reference to which the other "life goods" get their meaning and significance. Taylor calls this latter kind of reality a "constitutive good." He does so because the "constitutive good does more than just define the content of the moral theory. Love of it is what empowers us to be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being." (92-93)

Augustine's inward turn.

With the passage of centuries man's understanding of the constitutive good and his vision of the corresponding life goods that give meaning to earthly existence have undergone countless revisions and developments. A major milepost is the "turn inward" of Augustine. Heavily influenced by Plato's thought, Augustine created a synthesis between the God of Christianity and Plato's Idea of the Good. Elucidating the parallels between them, Taylor notes that "both provide the ultimate principle of being and knowledge; and both are portrayed with the same central image of the sun. Part of the force of the image in both philosophies is that the highest reality is very difficult, indeed in a sense impossible, to contemplate directly." But while, for Plato, we find out about this highest principle by looking outward to the objects which it orders, for Augustine

> our principal route to God is not through the object domain but "in" ourselves. This is because God is not just the transcendent object or just the principle of order of the nearer objects, which we strain to see. God is also and for us primarily the basic support and underlying principle of our knowing activity. God is not just what we long to see, but what powers the eye which sees. So the light of God is not just "out there", illuminating the order of being, as it is for Plato; it is also an "inner" light. [129]

Radical reflexivity.

It would be hard to exaggerate the significance of this internalization of the source of order. Men and women now looked within the self to find direction. Taylor notes that Augustine's turn to the self was a turn to "radical reflexivity." For the first time men and women, instead of focusing only on the outward things experienced, turned their gaze inward and became aware of their own active contribution to the process of experience. "In our normal dealings with things," Taylor explains, "we disregard this dimension of experience [the active role of the agent] and focus on the things experienced. But we can

turn and make this our object of attention, become aware of our awareness, try to experience our experiencing." Augustine's introduction of radical reflexivity and the first-person standpoint was a fateful one, Taylor continues, for the "modern epistemological tradition from Descartes, and all that has flowed from it in modern culture, has made this standpoint fundamental—to the point of aberration, one might think." (130-31)

But, unlike the thought of many who were to come later, Augustine's turn to radical reflexivity did not encompass radical subjectivity: the belief that there is no compelling standard set above the individual. "Augustine's proof of God is a proof from the first-person experience of knowing and reasoning. I am aware of my own sensing and thinking; and in reflecting on this, I am made aware of its dependence on something beyond [and above] it, something common. . . . By going inward, I am drawn upward." (134)

The will and knowledge.

Related to Augustine's reflexive turn—and of like significance—was his recognition of the importance of the will. "Where for Plato, our desire for the good is a function of how much we see it, for Augustine the will is not simply dependent on knowledge."

> The teleological theory of nature underlying Greek moral philosophy supposes that everyone is motivated by a love of the good, which can be sidetracked to evil through ignorance (the view that Plato attributes to Socrates) or distortive training and bad habits (Aristotle). Augustine's doctrine of the two loves allows for the possibility that our disposition may be radically perverse, driving us to turn our backs even on the good we see.

Taylor adds that for Augustine "the will is as much the independent variable, determining what we can know, as it is the dependent one, shaped by what we see. The causality is circular and not linear." (137-38)

Augustine's reflexive stance, with its accompanying focus on will, set the stage for an extensive series of varied, albeit related, positions that remain influential to this day. Space does not allow mentioning, let alone doing justice to, all of the theories discussed by Taylor. What can be said is that, in the wake of Augustine's inward turn, the old Greek account of knowledge in terms of "a self-revealing reality, like the Ideas," lost credibility. "A representation of reality now has to be constructed," says Taylor. "As the notion of 'idea' migrates from its ontic sense to apply henceforth to intra-psychic contents, to things 'in the mind', so the order of ideas ceases to be something we *find* and

becomes something we *build*." (144)

Heightened meaning in ordinary life.

Beginning with Descartes and progressing through thinkers as different as Locke, Bacon, the Protestant Reformers, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson, men and women increasingly sought their constitutive sources within the self. Those sources were found in man's dignity, which was variously attributed to an ability to make choices, objectify his universe and make instrumental use of nature, or a purported natural inclination to goodness and benevolence. Also during this period heightened meaning came to be associated not, as in the past, with certain highly esteemed callings—whether philosophy, statesmanship, soldiering, or asceticism—but with the qualities that are present to a greater or lesser degree in ordinary life. In some thinkers these internal moral or constitutive goods were attributed to the presence of God within, but as time passed the theistic dimension became less prevalent, and beliefs that had originated in Christianity often became secularized.

With the dawning of the Romantic movement, yet another crucial element of the modern conception of the self was added: the sense that men are endowed with inner depths, sometimes attributed to a oneness with nature, that are only made manifest as they are articulated in works of creative imagination. More is involved here than merely making known to others what was fully known beforehand to the artist or agent. Taylor explains that,

> in the case of the novel or play, the expression will also involve a formulation of what I have to say. I am taking something, a vision, a sense of things, which was inchoate and only partly formed, and giving it a specific shape. In this kind of case, we have difficulty in distinguishing sharply between medium and "message". For works of art, we readily sense that being in the medium they are is integral to them. Even when it is clear that they are saying something, we sense that we cannot fully render this in another form. [374]

What is true in art or literature also holds true in the world of action, Taylor argues.

> My claim is that the idea of nature as an intrinsic source goes along with an expressive view of human life. Fulfilling my nature means espousing the inner élan, the voice or impulse. And this makes what was hidden manifest for both myself and others. But this manifestation also helps to define what is to be realized. The direction of this élan wasn't and couldn't be clear prior to this manifestation. In realizing my nature, I have to define it in the sense of giving it some formulation, but this is also a definition in a stronger sense: I am realizing this formulation and thus giving my life a definitive shape.

> A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation; it is not just a matter of copying an external model or carrying out an already determinate formulation. [374-75]

For those living in the late twentieth century, this turn to expressivism—this (belated) recognition that the imagination does not merely reflect an external reality that is already given but creatively interacts with the historically given to bring into existence new reality that otherwise would not exist—is a crucial development that has irretrievably changed the world in which we live. Because art no longer is seen as mimetic or merely imitative but as epiphanic—*i.e.*, as providing the locus in which new realities fraught with meaning emerge from the inexhaustable depths—art and culture have assumed an unprecedented influence in our epoch and, for good or ill, have in large part displaced the role filled by religion in earlier times. One result is that "artists" and those recognized as "creative" are accorded a respect (frequently accompanied by special dispensation from the minimum restraints society demands of mere mortals) that is out of all proportion to historical precedent.

The eclipse of ontic logos.

Another result of reflexive expressivism is that ontic logos—the existence of a cosmic source of order that is publicly accessible to men and women unmediated by personal experience—is no longer real for us as it was for earlier generations. At its best, this change has been salutary, not least because it has opened us to a new appreciation of the positive contributions that can come from diverse abilities and unique personal perspectives. But the drive toward expressive fulfillment also has presented a darker side. Too often, in its modernist and postmodernist manifestations, it has issued in visions that glorify unrestricted freedom, amoral force, and arbitrary assertiveness on the part of individuals, groups, and sometimes whole nations. Such visions, Taylor writes, have had "effects, some of them catastrophic on a world scale." (445) Yet another weakness of the expressivist impulse, he adds, is its tendency toward radical subjectivity—the belief that there are no standards set above the individual—which gives rise to meaninglessness and banality.

Given the excesses and deficiencies of modern expressivism—and attendant deep societal divisions and human suffering sometimes approaching chaos—the temptation is strong to seek refuge in a simple return to pre-modern public sources. But such pre-modern sources cannot again provide the same level of certainty that once was

possible. This is so if for no other reason than that the pre-modern creeds now stand in tension with competing strains of thought, including not only expressivism but mechanistic utilitarianism of various kinds. The latter are powerful in part because they answer to deeply felt needs that have arisen over recent centuries and also because they speak a language that seems in tune with our more experiential approach to reality. Taylor points approvingly, for example, to the predominantly anti-hierarchical thrust of contemporary opinion. He sees this thrust as related to "the affirmation of ordinary life," which arose as a reaction to the earlier classical and Christian practice of imputing a special dignity to certain sharply defined classes based on their position in polity or church. Taylor adds that we as inheritors of modern culture "feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and beneficence, are peculiarly sensitive to the claims of equality, feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified, and put a very high priority on the avoidance of death and suffering." (495)

In comments similar to the one just quoted, Taylor seems too easily satisfied and self-congratulatory concerning the degree of "enlightenment" attained by twentieth-century European and American culture. He tends to view as unmixed blessings widely and strongly held beliefs about "equality," "freedom," "beneficence," and so forth—he calls these "moral goods"—that, depending on circumstances and the precise sense in which the terms are used, may in some instances be inimical to civilized life. Though Taylor seems to detect in contemporary society a nearer approximation to unanimity about widely proclaimed norms than arguably is either present or deserved, he nevertheless recognizes that these or any beliefs about right and wrong will be tenuous unless based on a more convincing "constitutive good" (*i.e.*, account of why standards that transcend our narrow self-interest deserve respect) than is now available either in traditional theism or competing varieties of non-theistic humanism.

Strengths and weaknesses of traditional theism.

The weakness of theism as traditionally articulated, according to Taylor, is that many doubt its truth. While the existence of God once was as obvious as that day is light and night dark, belief in God now has regressed and the practice of religion declined "to the point where from being central to the whole life of Western societies, public and private, this has become sub-cultural, one of many private forms of involvement which some people indulge in." (309) But Taylor sees potential strength in theism as well. "Opponents may judge it harshly

and think that it would be degrading and unfortunate for humans if it were true," he writes. "But no one doubts that those who embrace it will find a fully adequate moral source in it."

Non-theistic sources are problematic.

By way of contrast, Taylor notes, the two contending non-theistic moral sources that exert major influence in our time are "inherently problematic":

> The question is whether, even granted we fully recognize the dignity of disengaged reason, or the goodness of nature, this is in fact enough to justify the importance we put on it, the moral store we set by it, the ideals we erect on it. . . .
>
> We might say that all positions are problematized by the fact that they exist in a field of alternatives. But whereas faith is questioned as to its truth, dignity and nature are also called into question in respect of their adequacy if true. The nagging question for modern theism is simply: Is there really a God? The threat at the margin of modern non-theistic humanism is: So what? [317]

Toward a new synthesis.

What our time needs, then—urgently, palpably—is a new synthesis. What kind of synthesis? Taylor stops short of offering one, but he does hint at several criteria that an adequate synthesis would have to meet. It should incorporate a "theistic perspective": "great as the power of naturalist sources might be, the potential of a certain theistic perspective is incomparably greater." (518) Yet such a perspective should simultaneously be able to face squarely the "untold misery and even savagery" that have been wrought throughout history in the name of religion and—if possible, and Taylor is not sure that it is—should offer an intrinsic standard by which such false fruits could be distinguished from the true working of the spirit. The ideal, Taylor indicates, would be to avoid the "sacrifice, even mutilation," often associated with historical religion without "adopting a stripped-down secular outlook" that "involves stifling the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived." (519-20) To be convincing, the new articulation must accord with the way those now living view reality; it must, in other words, be compatible with contemporary man's reflexive awareness of the central and active role of the creative imagination both in shaping and apprehending the truth of existence. Taylor criticizes as "too narrow" the views of the "followers of Leo Strauss, which are critical of the whole modern turn." Such views, he argues, tend to overlook the "deeper moral vision, the genuine moral sources invoked in the aspiration to disengaged reason or expressive fulfillment" while disproportionately emphasizing the "less impressive motives—pride, self-satisfac-

tion, liberation from demanding standards. . . . Modernity is often read through its least impressive, most trivializing offshoots." (510-11) Also "too narrow" but for a different reason, Taylor writes, are theories such as those of Jürgen Habermas that do recognize the "demands of expressive fulfillment" but miss the potential of the expressivist stance for contributing "moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision."

The failure to see this potential, writes Taylor, "is a major gap. It is not just the epiphanic art of the last two centuries which fails to get its due. . . . We are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim to defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance." (510) Yet we can easily see why this gap exists. What is called for

> is not the exploration of an "objective" order in the classical sense of a publicly accessible reality. The order is only accessible through personal, hence "subjective", resonance. This is why . . . the danger of a regression to subjectivism always exists in this enterprise. It can easily slide into a celebration of our creative powers, or the sources can be appropriated, interpreted as within us, and represented as the basis for "liberation". But, at its best, in full integrity, the enterprise is an attempt to surmount subjectivism. It is just that this remains a continuing task, which cannot be put behind us once and for all, as with the public order of former times. [510]

An unresolved tension.

Taylor suggests the lineaments of a new synthesis but does not himself break through to one. One possible reason why he does not may be an unresolved tension in his thought that is partially illustrated in the passage just quoted. On the one hand, he says, we no longer have available to us "an 'objective' order in the classical sense of a publicly accessible reality." On the other hand, the order is accessible through "personal, hence 'subjective', resonance." Yet the goal is to "surmount subjectivism." But how is it possible to surmount subjectivism *with* subjectivism? Assuming it can be done, by what criteria are we to distinguish the subjectivism that does transcend the merely individual from the subjectivism that falls short of that goal? Still another question: If we can penetrate, with the aid of the creative imagination, to an order that transcends mere subjectivism, does this not point to the emergence of a new "publicly accessible reality" to replace the one that was lost: an event of world-wide historical significance? Implicit in Taylor's book is the possibility that these things can

be accomplished. Why search for a trans-personal order that cannot possibly be found, because it does not exist? That Taylor does not take up and extensively deal with these issues but leaves the tension unresolved indicates that he does not possess some philosophical categories and concepts that would alert him to the need for such a task and facilitate it. In fact, that philosophical work is well underway.

A great mystery about this book, considering the depth of Taylor's interest in expressivism and the creative imagination, is the lack of any mention of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. He has been perhaps the leading authority on these issues in this century. The omission is all the more conspicuous in that Croce creatively builds on and revises Hegel, a philosopher to whom Taylor has devoted much attention. (And where is John Dewey, author of such books as *Art as Experience*?) One part of Croce's work that would have been helpful to Taylor is a reformulation of dialectics that does away with inflexible alternatives originating in reification. This aspect of Croce would have rescued Taylor from a tendency to construct artificial alternatives, as when he separates subjectivity and universality without sufficiently recognizing their possible union. Another example of Taylor's use of overly rigid categorization is his rejection of hierarchy in favor of egalitarianism out of a belief that hierarchy is incompatible with a proper appreciation of the dignity of ordinary life.

But perhaps the most unfortunate flaw in this admirable work is its failure to recognize the extent to which the élan of human creativity contains bad potentialities as well as good and to explore sufficiently the nature of that tension. Taylor does not highlight that what keeps creativity humane is that it is disciplined by a higher power within the human self. Here Taylor could have learned much from a thinker who early in this century anticipated Taylor's arguments regarding creative imagination and the need for experiential validation. Irving Babbitt combined these insights with a stress on the existence of an ethical quality of will in man that is experienced by the individual but also transcends him. He recognized that imagination, to enrich and elevate human existence, must be grounded in this will. Babbitt's emphasis on ethical willing and on a corresponding quality of the imagination as the way to reality represents an important part of the synthesis that is needed.

But these matters pertaining to a new synthesis go beyond the scope of this particular book. In writing *Sources of the Self*, Taylor notes, the "intention was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried

goods through rearticulation—and thereby to make these sources again empower . . . ." (520) He has done that and more.