Charles Taylor on Identity and the Social Imaginary[1]

Craig Calhoun
New York University and Social Science Research Council

Among the most influential of late 20th Century philosophers, Charles Taylor has written on human agency, identity, and the self; language; the limits of epistemology; interpretation and explanation in social science; ethics; and democratic politics. His work is distinctive because of his innovative treatments of long-standing philosophical problems, including especially those deriving from applications of Enlightenment epistemology to theories of language, the self, and political action; and his unusually thorough integration of 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophical concerns and approaches.

Taylor's work is shaped by the view that adequate understanding of philosophical arguments requires an appreciation of their origins, changing contexts, and transformed meanings. It thus often takes the form of historical reconstructions that seek to identify the paths by which particular theories and languages of understanding or evaluation have been developed. This reflects both Taylor's sustained engagement with the theories of G.W.F. Hegel and his resistance to epistemological dichotomies such as "truth" and "falsehood" in favor of a notion of "epistemic gain" influenced by Gadamer.

Though Taylor's philosophical work centers on analytic issues with deep roots in scholarly traditions, he is nonetheless a philosopher with practical intent. His work is intended to help people resolve crucial problems of collective existence. This has drawn him to a sustained engagement with the social sciences—or, better, the *sciences humaines* in the French sense. He has been a professor of political science and together with Will Kymlicka and James Tully is one of the key developers of a distinctive Canadian school in political theory. This group addresses issues of citizenship, justice, and constitutional order with special attention to the relationship between community and diversity. While the issue of aboriginal populations is important to all in the group, it is especially the situation of Quebec and the questions of language and national integration that have been central to Taylor's sense of the issues. He has also engaged in practical politics, including attempting to stake out a position in Quebec as an advocate for Quebecois culture and separate constitutional status but also for continued integration into Canada. With roots in both francophone and anglophone Quebec, and in its particular challenges to constitutional order and national integration, Taylor has reached out to an unusually broad range of contemporary and historical societies for contrasting and complementary examples. His practical concerns extend to the very struggles over the nature of modernity and the possibilities for multiple modernities to coexist. A key dimension of this concern focuses on the ways in which the modern has been constituted as the secular, and the ways in which this is contested and in which places for continuing or renewed religious commitments may be found.

---

[1] Presented to the ASCUS, Pittsburgh, PA, Nov. 20, 1999.

In the present paper, I propose briefly to review several streams of work that contribute to Taylor's intellectual perspective and political and moral orientation. Hardly an exhaustive analysis, this review is intended to provide context for better grasping some of Taylor's recent and continuing concern with problems of cultural diversity, dilemmas of inclusion and exclusion, and the ways societies imagine themselves.

1. Explanation and Interpretation

In his most prominent early publications, Taylor addressed the status of explanation in psychology and the social sciences. *The Explanation of Behaviour* challenged the adequacy of behaviorism in psychology, principally by showing that mechanistic stimulus-response theories relying on a rigid epistemology of external cause and effect do not achieve the completeness of explanation they claim, and by arguing that accounting for intentional action entails a teleological understanding of the ends of action that cannot be achieved within purely causal theories. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" and a number of other shorter works extended this argument to politics and social analysis, showing not only that such attempts at explanation in terms of external approaches to 'brute facts' must fail to satisfy those who seek more meaningful understandings of human agency, but that they are incoherent or incomplete on their own terms. The external accounts they offer of human nature and action are challenged both by the necessity of an interpretative understanding by analysts and the constitutive role of culture and interpretative understanding in human action. The central example of this is found in language, a product of human action as well as a medium, and a source at once of meaning and of the uncertainties that call for interpretation. Social science cannot escape language, as Taylor writes, because social realities 'cannot be identified in abstraction from the language" ("Interpretation and the Sciences of Man"). This means that social realities are not directly and externally observable in the sense commonly evoked by reference to Durkheim's schema in *The Rules of Sociological Method*: treat social facts as things, because they are external, enduring, and coercive over individuals.

This theme remains important in Taylor's work. Many of his latter more substantive arguments are predicated on the notion that human beings are more complex and creative beings than most social science theory assumes. Following leads from both Wittgenstein and phenomenology, thus, Taylor has argued the limits to a conception of human action shaped by the idea of following rules. Rather than treating cognition as something that precedes behavior, he has sought to understand the ways in which both articulate and inarticulate understandings are joined in practical action. His approach here has been resolutely social, linking him to sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu as well as philosophers like Merleau-Ponty.

Taylor's critique of Cartesian cognitivism implicit in instrumental accounts of rationality and action is closely related to an argument against the main modern epistemology that both inspired and drew strength from the scientific revolutions of the 17th century and after. Taylor holds that this epistemological tradition both relied on an atomistic account of putatively undifferentiated nature (including human nature) and erected a perniciously sharp distinction between knower and object of knowledge with the result that it drastically distorted and narrowed the scope of understanding of human life. This is an important corollary of what Taylor has called the "secular age." By this he means not merely an end to or marginalization of religious belief, but the disembedding of the human subject from all broader frameworks of meaning.

2. Hegel

The same issues motivate much of Taylor's engagement with Hegel. Hegel too challenged the reigning epistemological tradition and especially its atomistic inattention to the necessary relatedness of all subjects and objects, and to the internal differentiation of both subjects and objects. He argued that any adequate account of the human subject, and of the successful access of such subjects to each other and to their world, must rely on an understanding of persons as existing only in interaction, as becoming individuals only through participation in an intersubjective reality—and indeed, as achieving their moral potential only in a very institutionalized social world. Taylor argues that this richer account of the person requires an understanding of language as not merely neutrally picking out objects of attention or reflecting pre-given inner states, but as helping to constitute and shape both emotions and other inner phenomena and our access to and understanding of external phenomena. Following also Herder, Taylor places these positions on bases significantly different from Hegel's.

This is necessary because Taylor holds that Hegel ultimately failed to achieve the rational certainty about the absolute that he sought. Hegel's arguments reveal an interpretive vision of power and insight, but not a system of determinate necessity. Building then on the critical foundation he shares in large part with Hegel, but rejecting the more extreme claims of Hegel's *Logic* and related elements of his substantive philosophical anthropology and social theory, Taylor has sought to advance an understanding of the nature and activities of and relations among human subjects and of the kind of science that can grasp these subjects, their relations and activities. This entails moving "beyond epistemology," but not following Hegel in the attempt to ground all argument in ontology.

Perhaps more important than anything else that he has drawn from Hegel, Taylor remains enduringly engaged with the idea of a differentiated, pluriform whole. He sees the limits of conceptions of unity that erase difference. There was, perhaps, a premature closure to Hegel's conception of such a whole: Prussia in 1821 didn't exhaust history's cornucopia. Nonetheless, Hegel identified a crucial critical standpoint on the dimension of modernity that equates unity with similarity.

3. Language

Dualist epistemology is predicated on a rigid separation of subject and object that makes us unable to grasp distinctive features of human life and activity as distinct from the behavior of physical objects and natural systems. As we saw above, language is a specific and powerful instance of the ways in which human cultural creativity constitutes the social world and the individual self, making it impossible to grasp either adequately from a completely external approach.

Taylor moves beyond this by developing ‘expressivist’ or ‘constitutive’ theories of language, inaugurated by Herder and important to the Romantic tradition, but often left inadequately grounded in an appeal to immediate self-knowledge. These theories help Taylor to show the human agent to be understandable only as a participant in a linguistic community. Not only are human beings users of language, thus, people can only be truly human and truly individuals by virtue of intersubjectively created and maintained language. Correspondingly, language itself cannot be understood entirely as a matter of reference and predication judged externally from the standpoint of observers who are themselves posited as initially pre- or extra linguistic. Instead, Taylor suggests, actual linguistic activity also involves constructing objects by making identifications of significance that cannot adequately be rendered in truth-conditional form. In this sense, Taylor moves beyond a purely “expressivist” theory of language to a more “constitutive” account in which language not only expresses the inner being of persons or cultures, but gives form and reality to them. Moreover, intersubjectively constituted agents are never in a purely external relationship to language, nor indeed to the rest of their worlds insofar as these are constituted in part through language.

It is important to see this as partly a matter of the constitutive role of specific concepts—like that of individual—and partly of broader dimensions of linguistic practice that shape emotions and pre-reflective understandings.

4. Strong evaluation and the self

In a similar fashion, Taylor argues that human agents necessarily engage in different orders of cognition and evaluation. We engage in practical reason always against a background of ‘strong evaluations’. These are simultaneously intellectual and moral commitments that constitute us as knowers and judgers, and that make possible our more specific and immediate knowledge and judgments. Such commitments may vary, but are necessary to the constitution of the self.

Modern moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, and on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life. In this, it reflects the reliance on the notion of a disembodied, decontextualized, and disengaged subject pioneered by post-17th century science and the epistemology to which it helped give rise. Accordingly, a philosophical priority is to reconstruct both the dominant modern understandings of the self and alternative interpretations of human agents. Taylor takes on this task in *Sources of the Self.* A key feature of human agency, he shows, is that it is constituted only within frameworks of strong evaluation--whether traditional notions of the primacy of honor, Platonic accounts of the virtues of reason and self-mastery, or modern understandings of the expressive power of inner selves. Even the utilitarian notion that all evaluations are ultimately quantitatively commensurable in fact depends on unadmitted qualitative distinctions including strong evaluations in favor of rationality and universal benevolence (counting everyone's interests equally). The historical story of the changing character of the modern self is thus inextricably an account of the transformation of moral capacities because these are rooted in changing constructions of agency. Changes in the idea of self, moreover, were often driven directly by attempts to resolve moral or religious problems, though their long-term results were sometimes to undermine the theological or other commitments that gave rise to the new conceptions. A crucial moment in this process was the transformation in evaluation of ordinary life, the movement of the world of work and family from the margins of morality to the center of the modern agents moral commitments. This helped to make possible new positive understandings of the self as a physical, including sexual being, and contributed both to utilitarianism, with its reckonings of all manner of satisfactions without reference to the hierarchy that had previously denigrated those of ordinary life, and to Romanticism with its understanding of the primacy of individual expression.

At the same time, it is crucial to see that the categories and horizons of strong evaluations are not purely individual, even in the most individualistic cultures. They are socially produced and reproduced. In the same manner as language is constitutive of human existence, so too are cultural frameworks of evaluation. The various ways of being human, and of being an individual, are constituted within and partially by them, and change in significant part through change in these frameworks as well as by individual choices.

5. Communitarianism and multiculturalism

Although these modern transformations of the self lead to new capacities for individuation and fulfillment in interpersonal relationships, these new capacities give rise to new ethical and political challenges. The modern moral subject is one understood in problematically asocial and decontextualized terms in both the utilitarian-rationalist and Romantic versions. Taylor (1989) has rightly asked: doesn't the radical prioritization of the individual self depend on some basic misunderstandings about what it means to be an individual, including the need to participate in the shared community of speakers of a language and way in which our own individual thoughts and actions depend on a background of practices, institutions, and understandings that we do not create as individuals? If we treat communities only as sums of individuals, how do we account for the genesis of these individuals: their nurturance as children, their reliance on shared culture--including even the culture of individualism, and their psychical as well as social dependence on interpersonal relations and institutions?

Increased attention to intersubjective community is important not only for philosophical accuracy but for moral life and personal satisfaction. Taylor is thus part of the diverse philosophical and political movement termed 'communitarianism'. His interest in community, however, is distinct from both the neo-Aristotelian variant epitomized by Alasdair MacIntyre, and the sociological idealizations of Amitai Etzioni or Philip Selznick. His distinctive approach is rooted in his enduring emphases on the constitutive role of language and the intersubjective nature of agency. He addresses the importance—even necessity—of both a social dimension to human life and to values achieved only in and understandable only through community. Taylor focuses, thus, not simply on community as an additional value alongside others, but on the ways in which membership in a community provides the basis for strong moral evaluations, for the pursuit of human goods that are irreducibly social in nature, and for the development of identity and a sense of location in the dramatically enlarged world of modernity. In this last regard, he takes up nationalism in particular and also the more general problem of relating worlds of human agency and social participation to what Heidegger called the "age of the world picture".

Drawing on his analysis of the modern self, Taylor shows in *The Ethics of Authenticity* how the search for authentic self-fulfillment can become incoherent and selfdefeating when it is tied to atomistic individualism, the overvaluation of instrumental reason, and an alienation from public life. At the same time, he argues against pessimism, suggesting that the other elements of our philosophical and cultural traditions give us resources for confronting our current challenges. Crucially, he calls for recognizing that our wants are necessarily qualitatively distinguishable (so that, among other things, we can want to have better wants), that our individuality is grounded in sociality (so that we can conceive of freedom in ways other than absence of external constraint), and that frameworks of strong evaluation are inescapable (so that the attribution of significance is not simply a matter of immediate subjective choice).

Among the most important themes in this recent work is a renewed link to Hegel. In many different versions of the fragmentation of political life, Taylor sees a common theme of competing demands for recognition of the legitimacy or value of different identities. This "politics of recognition"--appearing in nationalism, ethnic politics, feminism, and multiculturalism-is an outgrowth of the modern valuation of self and ordinary life. Political phenomena, thus, cannot be understood solely in terms of the categories of the explicitly political—or of political science in its standard forms. The production of identities exceeds the formally and openly political. Though it commonly does involve issues of power and politics, it cannot be reduced to them. Neither, however, is the production of identities purely "prepolitical," a matter of formation in private life prior to public.[2]

Claims often assert the rightness and value of differences among people, in contradiction to earlier politics that stressed universal dignity by recommending blindness to differences. Many are incoherent, however, in demanding a recognition of equal worth that can only be met by a 'soft relativism' since it is demanded in advance of genuine evaluative engagement. This produces an inauthentic recognition that is at best a marginal advance on ethnocentric denigration or nonrecognition. There is no resolution to this dilemma in pure individualistic liberalism, Taylor argues, largely because of its homogenizing conception of the person and consequent incapacity to provide a sense of significant differentiation so that partial communities can be centers of value within larger polities. Such intermediate associations, he argues following Tocqueville, are not merely local refuges but means of connecting members to the whole and empowering them within it. A presumption of mutual respect is a useful beginning. It is, however, a 'mere ought,' unless linked to a notion of the self as (a) necessarily socially engaged rather than merely observing from an external vantage point, (b) limited in its capacity for understanding by the very cultural frameworks that make its individuality and its understanding possible, and (c) open to change through communicative interaction. Such a notion of the self fits with the aspiration to combine full moral autonomy with a recovery of community that is both expressive of the common life of its members and constitutive of their individuality.

---

[2] By contrast, Habermas approaches identities as forged in private life and then bracketed for discourse in the public sphere though not for strategic actions in relation to political power (*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). This has provoked a good deal of critical discussion. See Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) and *Critical Social Theory*. In a different way, much nationalist ideology also posits the nation as the

The idea of community itself is one of the issues. Communitarian arguments move us on the path to understanding the public good as a social and cultural project because they show us why the public good must be understood in terms of social relations and culture. At the same time, they inhibit further progress in two ways. First, the communitarian discourse obscures the extent to which different sorts of social relations figure in different kinds and scales of collectivities. In his most recent work, Taylor has begun to attend to this issue, placing more stress on the distinction between directly interpersonal relations and the "metatopical" spaces that transcend particular localities and immediate interactions. Personally, I would prefer to keep the terms community and public distinct to signal one aspect of this, and at the same time to counterpose both to systemic social organization that takes place outside either communal organizations of interdependent social relations or culturally differentiated and discursively mediated publics. Second, the communitarian discourse obscures the extent to which social collectivities are forged rather than found. It is not enough to assert that the public good is more than the sum of individual interests, or that a community is more than the sum of individual members.

Thus Taylor has written:

---

prepolitical ground of politics and the most salient version of political identity. Membership in the nation is treated as the beginning of politics rather than part of it, subject to continual reconstitution.

> As individuals we value certain things; we find certain outcomes positive. But these things can only be good in this way, or satisfying or positive after their particular fashion, because of the background understanding which has developed in our culture. Thus I may value the fulfillment which comes from a certain kind of authentic self-expression or the experience which arises from certain works of art, or outcomes in which people stand with each other on a footing of frankness and equality. But these things are only possible against the background of a certain culture. ...
>
> If these things are goods, then other things being equal, so must the culture be which makes them possible. If I want to maximize these goods, then I must want to preserve and strengthen this culture. But the culture as a good, or more cautiously as the locus of some goods (for there might be much that is reprehensible in it as well), is not an individual good (Taylor 1995).

Taylor's argument is, I think, a sensible one and, coupled with Amartya Sen's famous analysis of "welfarism," shows that a completely utilitarian notion of the public good cannot be adequate.[i] Such a notion suggests among other things that what is good about any social state of affairs can be decomposed into goods for members considered as individuals. This is too much priority for the individual. Taylor show us why we value common goods as something more than the sum of individual goods. But in emphasizing the social, consider the role played by the concept of culture as Taylor (perhaps casually) deploys it.

Taylor speaks confidently of "this culture" and "the culture," in ways that suggest that he imagines them to be rather strongly integrated and bounded. This singular and integral notion of culture invites poststructuralist critiques and the assertion of innumerable claims to subcultural autonomy. Taylor's terms keep us from recognizing that the sort of cultural context or background that makes possible both collective and individual goods is always plural, always in process, and never altogether coherent. There is never a single tradition to be "preserved and strengthened" by itself, but always a field within which multiple traditions contend, each weaving into the fabric of the others even if they maintain recognizable distinction. This multiculturalism is not always happy, but rather rent through with power and violence as well as excitement and mutual influence. But neither is it merely some new ideal; it is the inextricable condition of life, varying in extent, but present throughout world history. Even Confucian China, paradigm case of a self-declared integrated culture, was simultaneously Buddhist and Taoist China; was home to "iconoclastic" schools of painting and poetry that sometimes drew more eyes and ears than the putative mainstream; and was superimposed, in a sense, as an elite project over numerous and often regionally distinct folk cultures. So it is clearly also with Canada: capitalist, democratic country of immigrants, new nation and home of first nations, participant in global culture and anxious Northern neighbor, etc. And so it is, Taylor's theory suggests, *within* Canada's constituent linguistic nations. To affirm the linguistic and cultural commonality of Quebecois, thus, is not necessarily to refuse multiculturalism or plurality of identities. It is to affirm one of the ways in which such diversity is constitutive of a complex, differentiated whole (a Hegelian, dialectical whole, as distinct from a simple unity).

The plurality is inscribed not only into national identities, but into identity-forming and society-constituting projects like modernity. There are, Taylor affirms, necessarily multiple modernities, shaped by different frameworks of strong evaluation and reproduced with different core values and different relationships between individual and community.

6. Democracy, Exclusion, and the Social Imaginary

One of the major "catches" to all communitarian approaches to collective identity and political solidarity is the necessity—or at least implication—of exclusion. Taylor has faced this directly, not shirking from the notion that a favorable strong evaluation of certain goods entails a negative view of their opposites. While he does not in any way discount the liberal virtue of tolerance, thus, he distinguished deeper senses of recognition and positive valuation from the "soft relativism" of attempts to value everyone equally.

The key issue is that democracy depends on a notion of "the people" that is usually not critically explored or explicated. The question of who counts as a legitimate member of the people has come to the fore in debates over international migration, among other contexts, but the underlying issue of what "the people" means has received less attention. This is an issue that requires attention to several of the themes that have been among Taylor's central philosophical foci. The people, for example, is rhetorically constructed by the idea of nation and a cluster of associated linguistic constructions that give it varying valences in different contexts. For this and other reasons, it is impossible to arrive at an adequate understanding of the political meaning of the category, "the people", from an entirely external perspective. The seemingly objective categories used to determine who gets what passport or votes in which election both presume a clarity that is often lacking and obscure the processes of their own political and cultural construction. In particular, external approaches to identifying "the people" fail to provide an understanding of why and when the definition of the whole becomes a political problem, and which issues become the key signifiers in debate. Why, for example, are there contexts where race matters less than language and others in which that ordering is hard to imagine? This is closely related to the fact that belonging to (or being excluded from) "the people" is not simply a matter of large-scale political participation in modern society. It is precisely the kind of question of personal identity that produces passions that escape the conventional categories of the political. This is so, we can see following Taylor, because of the extent to which ideas and feelings about "the people" are woven into the moral frameworks of "strong evaluation" in relation to which we establish our senses of self. There is an important Hegelian moment, thus, with a dialectic of the whole and its parts. Without grasping this dialectic, we can understand neither of its polar dimensions—nation and individual. We are also especially apt to be misled into seeing them as opposites rather than complicit with each other. But in fact, the ideas of nation and individual grew up together in Western history and continue to inform each other. Far from being an objective distinction of collective from singular, the opposition of nation and individual reflects a tension-laden relationship. Nations are themselves individuals. Moreover, the relationship between human persons and nations is commonly constructed as immediate, so that intermediate associations and subsidiary identities are displaced by it. In this way, nations commonly appear in rhetorical practice as categories of similar individuals as well as organisms in their own right.[3]

If this is how nationalist ideologies commonly work, this does not mean that they cannot be contested. One dimension of Taylor's work suggests the need to steer a path that neither uncritically affirms nationalism's constructions of particular prepolitical identities, nor debunks nationalism and national identity as a false way of imagining social identity (as, for example, is implied in some uses of the term "invention of tradition"). Nationalism is a vital way of constructing identity in the modern world in the dual sense that it is necessarily reproduced by the existing institutional order, and that it is alive. It is part of the background against which human beings become, in their different ways, fully human as well as active participants in modern social life. This does not mean that every expression or construction of nationalism or national identity is good; far from it. But it does mean that we should be wary of approaches that try to distinguish too neatly good patriotism from bad nationalism, or even civic from ethnic nationalism. Obviously, to take the latter opposition, the civic and the ethnic can be meaningfully distinguished. Taylor is indeed a critic of the sort of ethnic nationalism that would make membership in a nation solely a matter of inherited racial-cultural identity. In the Quebec and Canadian cases alike, therefore, he is an advocate of projects that allow immigrants and minorities to maintain distinctive identities while also achieving membership in larger political and linguistic-cultural collectivities.[4] But Taylor's theory also suggests that it is important to avoid using the civic/ethnic opposition in a way that implies that civic nationalism is somehow culture-free, a matter of purely rational political processes in which citizens are abstracted from their "non-political" identities. Civic nationalism is also dependent on a social imaginary, on cultural constructions that enable its particular practices, constructions of meaning, and processes of recognition.[5]

---

[3] I have explored these issues in *Nationalism* (Minnesota, 1997).

In all these ways, Taylorian themes open up a seemingly unproblematic concept—the people—and suggest reasons why exploring its construction is basic for addressing satisfactorily some of the most pressing problems of contemporary democracy. These center on the ways in which the constructions of collective identity and internal diversity—community and multiculturalism come into tension with each other. As Taylor has recognized, the key issue is "the need, in self-governing societies, of a high degree of cohesion".[6] Democratic states, in other words, require a kind and level of "peopleness" that is not required in other forms of government. They offer a level of inclusion that is unprecedented—the government of **all** the people—but they place a new pressure on the constitution of this people in socio-cultural and political practice. This makes it clear, I think, that although all the aspects of constructing peoplehood cannot be brought into explicit political contention, nonetheless the process of constructing the relevant people cannot be treated as prepolitical, simply the taken-as-given basis for politics. This is, however, what much nationalist discourse does, and it is also what much political philosophy does—even in classic forms like Rawls' theory of justice. It says, in effect, "given a people, how should it be governed or socially organized?" Following Taylor's lines of reasoning, we can see that there will be no satisfactory result to such inquiries—or at least no satisfactory basis within them for tending to today's basic political questions as raised by Quebec or aboriginal populations—from such an external perspective.[7]

---

[4] I think that Taylor would habitually write "communities" not "collectivities" in a sentence such as this, and indeed, that sounds so right that I started to do so myself. But, I think this usage elides an important distinction between the relatively dense networks and face-to-face contact of local communities, which deeply informs the meaning and emotional weight we give the term community, and the large-scale categories of persons and cultural commonalities that work at the level of nations and states.

[5] This goes beyond asserting that the ideal-typical cases of civic vs. ethnic nationalism—say, France vs. Germany—are more complex. It is true that French national identity sometimes includes ethnic features and indeed that the ideology of civic nationalism may obscure this as much as contest it. It is also true that German nationalism is civic as well as ethnic. But the crucial point is that even the civicness of certain nationalisms and political processes is culturally produced and reproduced and therefore cannot be understood apart from culture.

As Taylor makes us see, to take democracy seriously means taking seriously the question of how the people can be understood to have agency—power to act autonomously and constructively--"what makes this group of people as they continue over time a common agent".[8] Nonetheless, it seems to me that Taylor's approach here has a significant limit. It is suggested by the sentence that follows the one I quoted above. I quoted "the need, in self-govening societies, of a high degree of cohesion." Taylor goes on, "Democratic states need something like a common identity." I don't altogether dispute this, but I want to pose some questions to Charles about the way he approaches this.

First, is cohesion really entirely a matter of identity? This seems to me to underestimate the extent to which people are held together by their common participation in social processes that give them mutual commitments and investments in shared goods without necessarily giving them identity. This is a matter of both institutions and social networks. It may be grasped with varying acuity in any social imaginary.

---

[6] "Modern social imaginaries," draft p. 1.

[7] I should indicate that while I think this reflects the import and development of Taylor's thinking, for several years my own has been intertwined with his on these issues and I may not adequately distinguish them.

Second, is “*a* common identity” really what is required? I think it is not clear why there should need to be a single shared identity at the level of democratic citizenry or “the people”. We need, I think, an approach to issues of identity that asks how different identities fit together well or poorly, what kinds of institutions facilitate mutuality, etc. Even a shared culture need not pivot on a single shared identity for all people shaped by that culture. Presumably cultures only partially—even minimally—shared could posit commitments to common institutions on different grounds or identities. Relatedly, do practices (such as elections) require one singular common understanding or a set of coinciding understandings? This is a basic question for the Canadian issue of enabling coexistence of people with different social imaginaries. It raises the possibility that the design of political (and other) institutions may be crucial, even when backed by common social imagines (or before these are in place).

Third, what understanding of collective action is implied by the notion that in order to provide subjectivity to democratic self-rule, a group of people must be “a common agent”? I am in agreement with Taylor about the need to transcend accounts that assume disembedded individuals as the necessary units of all agency, but I worry about presuming singularity of will into collective agency. How does this approach to “we the people” acting in common relate to the politics of representation? The problem of who speaks for any whole is not a contingent issue following from it, but part of its very constitution.

Fourth, does the emphasis in Taylor’s account fall too much on the common culture that is always already there as the basis of common political action, rather than on the common action through which people knit culture together recurrently and incompletely. Put another way, sometimes I see Taylor presenting the notion of common culture—and democratic peoplehood—as projects. At other times, I see him presenting already accomplished common culture as a condition for democratic peoplehood. The sense of project is lost. How does the culture change in public life and how consciously

---

[8] “Modern social imaginaries,” draft p. 33

can this process be shaped? One notion that Taylor's work suggests, is that this may be one of the distinctive public roles of political (and social and cultural) theory.

Taylor sees many of these issues, I think. He struggles with them and as he does so informs us all. But some remain to be resolved adequately. My contention here is that Taylor's work can help us think a more plural notion of how culture and social practice unify us, one in which culture is less the pre-existing basis of unity than Taylor himself tends to treat it.

---

[i] Amartya Sen ("Utilitarianism and Welfarism." *Journal of Philosophy* 76(1979): 463-489, at 468) defines welfarism as the utilitarian position that "the judgment of the relative goodness of alternative states of affairs must be based exclusively on, and taken as an increasingly function of, the respective collections of individual utilities in these states".

References

Works by Charles Taylor

The Explanation of Behaviour. London, 1967.
Hegel. Cambridge, 1975
Hegel and Modern Society. Cambridge, 1977
Human Agency and Language. Cambridge, 1985.
Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Cambridge, 1985
Sources of the Self. Cambridge, MA, 1989
Philosophical Arguments. Cambridge, MA, 1995
The Ethics of Authenticity. Cambridge, MA, 1991 (also published as *Malaises of Modernity)*
"The Politics of Recognition" in Amy Gutman, ed. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.* Rev. ed., Princeton, 1994.