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On Charles Taylor's in *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism, The Malaise of Modernity, and Sources of the Self*.

"You cannot derive 'ought-statements' from 'is-statements'," is one of those sentences that Phil. 100 students learn to say. The statement reveals three important features of the mainstream of contemporary moral theory: the emphasis it lays on the idea of obligation, the sharp distinction it draws between facts and values, and the belief it maintains in the impossibility of fundamental justification—which belief testifies to the importance such philosophers attach to that enterprise.

But Charles Taylor, a professor of philosophy at McGill University and a formidable presence in the world of contemporary philosophy does not embrace this consensus position—this despite his having been Chichele Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, not only one of the most prestigious positions in the academic world but also one right at the centre of Anglo-American philosophic orthodoxy.

He never wholeheartedly accepted the teachings of Ryle, Moore, or the early Wittgenstein. He studied Herder instead, a figure whose thought so fully embodies the spirit of Romanticism that he was all but dismissed by English-speaking philosophy. His first important writings were on Hegel—the monumental *Hegel* and *Hegel and the Modern State*—and they appeared in a period when Anglo-American philosophers largely accepted Russell's conclusion that "the idealist system [in which the meaning of each part is said to depend on its relation to the whole] is a spurious concept." Thus, only quite recently an important figure in English and American philosophy surveyed the contemporary scene and asked wonderingly, "Why Hegel now?"

He is, however, not exactly nonpareil among contemporary moral philosophers. His ideas resemble, in many important respects, those of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose book *After Virtue* is among the most read philosophic texts of the past decade, or Iris Murdoch, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Like the latter, Taylor believes moral ideals animate philosophy and, what is more important, insists upon the importance of life that aspires to an ideal of perfection and is given over to a pursuit of the idea of the Good. The most discussed ethical theories take reason as simply instrumental reason and depict humans as agents who strive to maximize their self-interest. Aristotle to the contrary believed that among the tasks of reason is discerning the ends for which humans are suited and that one who is merely able at pursuing one's self-interest can never be wise, for he or she will lack understanding of the correct ends of human life. Murdoch and Taylor's remarks on the role of ideals in human self-understanding have many points of contact with Aristotle's ethical theory, though neither accepts its ontological foundations.

Like Murdoch, too, Taylor has little enthusiasm for thinkers who herald the death of the subject. Taylor's writing even shares with *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* a rambling, digressive and repetitive form that reveals similar aspirations to draw all aspects of history and culture under the same explanatory rubric—the same 'totalizing' drive, as the politically correct professors would say, failing to realize just how the thinkers in question understand the idea of explanation. The digressive form of Taylor's writing has brought criticism upon him from philosophical writers who have stronger commitments to the Anglo-American form of argument, an altogether more coercive manner of conceptual analysis. The White Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, Bernard Williams, reviewing Taylor's *magnum opus*, *Sources of*

the Self: The Making of Modern Identity in *The New York Review of Books* (in a generally positive review) remarked on the book's "improvisatory air" and commented that, "It seems . . . as though the manuscript had been put into shoe boxes and sent to the printer. Some of this is merely tiresome . . ."

To the contrary, I think there is good reason for this form. The justification is simple: cultural theory excels by becoming explanatorily complete. The more the theory can explain the unity of culture, the better it has exposed the foundational beliefs and attitudes—the "world-picture" that generates the cultural phenomena we observe. So Taylor proceeds by a strategy of inclusion—while commenting on the Cartesian self, he remarks on Corneille, Ramus, and the neo-Stoics Justus Lipsius and Guillaume du Vair, to mention only those he deals with at some length. A remark he makes while commenting on the movement represented by the last two figures reveals everything about his efforts to hold philosophy, literature, institutional history and cultural theory in a unifying conspectus. "What one finds running through all the aspects of this constellation—the new philosophy, methods of administration and military organization, spirit of government and methods of discipline—is the growing ideal of a human agent who is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action." Taylor examines how the many features of a culture are tied up with the self-understanding that humans beings in that culture have. There is understandably less of this in *The Malaise of Modernity* than in *Sources of the Self* and this makes *The Malaise of Modernity* a less rich feast. It chagrins me to see *The Malaise of Modernity* on undergraduate reading lists when it is only a good book while *Sources of the Self* is surely one of the best English-language books to appear anywhere in the last decade. I think teachers do good for their students when the lead them to encounter such brilliance as shows in Taylor's big book.

Furthermore, the baggy form of *Sources of the Self* enhances a most endearing feature of the work, its conversational quality. It is not that the writing style is informal or too casual for the issues that Taylor takes up; rather the style resembles that of a discourse of an enormously learned person who is circumambulating the problems of contemporary existence, looking at them from all points of view to be sure he has done justice to them. The tone of the conversation is one of concern and enormous generosity. Reading them is a treat because one feels oneself engaging with a very kindly man. Tied to the format of a radio lecture, as he was when writing *The Malaise of Modernity*, or to the public address or the learned paper, as he was when writing most of the essays in *Reconciling the Solitudes*, Taylor is less expansive. While still warm, the writing is not so downright endearing as *Sources of the Self* is.

Taylor shares with MacIntyre a Herderian concern with the ways in which language forms the self. The provenance of Taylor's communitarianism is the very well-known Master and Slave section of Hegel's *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* that, on one reading, provides a parable about how interpersonal exchange constitutes identity. Likely this passage inspired Taylor's interest in the languages of recognition. MacIntyre's displays similar interests in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality*, in a passage in which he condemns the English language for being a traditionless internationalized language, that has lost its anthropogenetic power as it been used increasingly to translate between so many local languages. In this passage he sounds much as Gershom Scholem did in his famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig. Referring to the secular use of the sacred language, Hebrew, Scholem wrote, "the phantasmagoric volapück that is spoken in our streets defines exactly the inexpressive linguistic space when, alone, it has made the 'secularization' of the language possible." Even in its dark apocalypticism, MacIntyre's ideas about the effects of speaking a debased language echo Scholem's remarkable predications of 1926:

Language is name. It is in the name that the power of language is buried; it is in that the abyss that it keeps hidden is sealed. For having called up, on a daily basis, the ancient names, it is no longer within our control to ward off the powers that they contain. Once awakened, they will appear in the full light of day, for we have invoked them with a terrible violence. To be sure, the language that we speak is rudimentary, almost ghostly. The names haunt our words; writers and journalists trifle with them, feigning to believe, or to make God believe that all this is of no importance. And nonetheless, in this debased and ghostly language, the force of the sacred often seems to be speaking to us . . . those who had undertaken to revive the Hebrew tongue did not believe in the reality of the Judgement to which they were subjecting us all. Would to God that the rashness with which we have drawn into this apocalyptic path would not lead us to our ruin.

The apocalyptic tone of this terrible passage foreshadowed a horrible calamity. While I fear drawing any comparisons with that dreadful time, I do fear that Scholem's words might prove to be foretelling for us all. The universalism of the language of values that we now speak invokes moral terms, but it uses them in a debased way. Though the terms of this language are moral, the language lacks any moral purpose, inasmuch as the globalization for which it speaks is a discourse of economics and specifically of multinational enterprise. It does not concern what humans are suited for but speaks only for unbridling capital and furthering its concentration in the hands of a few well-to-do. In speaking this language, we summon moral terms, and a moral force haunts our vocabulary as a specter might. The rashness and arrogance with which the discourse of business has arrogated moral terms to its language terrify me, just as the rash uses of Hebrew terrified Scholem. The inhumanity of an age that arrogates to the moral category of a hypergood (to use Taylor's term) a term that lacks any moral force would obviously be a time of tyranny (in the modern sense.) Such an age would lack the skills for accommodating the spiritual dimension of existence and reduce humans to instruments of a vast, impersonal machine operated by people who think of society as a machine that they can rebuild from the ground up and shape it to their liking. That age has begun. At every turn I discover people who are willing to lie, connive and cheat—who will rob parents, even on their deathbed, the satisfaction of knowing of their offspring's achievement and deprive husbands and fathers a livelihood in the name of their higher justice. Not only do "the educated" tolerate such outrages against decency, they defend them in a spurious moral language, a moral volapük that, in being uttered, will surely unleash great harm on civilized existence. This language is now the common tongue of sociology classrooms, religious studies seminars, colloquia in literary theory, addresses by the cultural commissars of the parallel gallery system and articles by dutifully correct arts critics.

Even if our rashness does not unleash such a terrible wrath upon us, the substitution of a phantasm language of commerce for a deeply human, and deeply spiritual language of morality can only reduce us. Herder's notions about identity that had such influence on Taylor are relevant here. Herder proposed that human beings take much of what they are through the languages they make and the words they bring forth in discourse with others. When we have such a spurious and debased moral language as ours, how can we be but mere imitations of what human beings might be?

What makes this question of Taylor's generous assessment of modernity still more puzzling is the similarities of his thought to MacIntyre's. The similarities with MacIntyre arise

even with a central notion of Taylor's moral theory, that of 'strong evaluations.' We must regard some of our evaluations of better or worse not merely as stronger preferences, but as 'higher,' or 'more noble,' or more important or more worthwhile or more admirable than others. He considers the problem transcendently, asking what must be true for such evaluations to be possible. He concludes that for ethical judgments to have meaning we must have moral bearings—we must be located in a field of obligations, not preferences.

Nor can we explain such judgments if we assume that we invent morality from the ground up, as sociologists (and sociologized youth and sociologized literary theory professors), do. Taylor seeks ideals that give meaning to such strong evaluations, ideals the absence of which would preclude the making of strong evaluations.

Bernard Williams, to take one example, seems flummoxed by the transcendental turn of Taylor's thinking. In the review mentioned above, he paraphrases Ludwig Feuerbach to formulate a principle against Taylor's method. What he calls Feuerbach's axiom we in turn might paraphrase as, "if higher ideas are false, they explain nothing and are themselves in need of explanation." This presumes that Taylor, at least implicitly, argues deductively, from higher principles to derivative principles. But his procedure is just the reverse: he asks what the history shows to be true about moral consciousness, then asks what must be the case for them to be true. His justification for morality is dialectical, not logical, for he asks how we can make sense of moral claims.

There are other similarities with MacIntyre. Like Alasdair MacIntyre, Taylor considers modern accounts of moral experience to be seriously deficient and, like MacIntyre, he believes that the deficiencies of these accounts result from the feebleness of their ontological bases. The modern world-view is resolutely naturalistic; it seeks to understand nature—human and nonhuman nature—as objectively as possible and frames its discourse on all matters in language that seems to resemble that of science. Its discourse concerning the self has the same characteristics. Some of the most interesting passages in Taylor's writing appear in articles that neatly dismantle the philosophical errors in the foundations of behaviourism and its present-day descendent, cognitive science based on the assumed analogies between the biological and the silicon brain as symbol processing devices. It is something of a pity that *The Malaise of Modernity* includes no commentary on this matter. Presumably Taylor felt these issues to be too technical, and for the specialist philosopher, not the reader (or listener) to whom Taylor addressed these lectures. The importance of the issue makes me wish that he had chosen differently.

Taylor does not share MacIntyre's conclusions about either the outcome of or the remedy for the Enlightenment project—the Northern European (and principally Scottish) Enlightenment, the Enlightenment represented by David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, James Stair, Andrew Fletcher, Lord Kames and Lord Monboddo—of secularized Protestant intellectuals. A feature that made MacIntyre's work important for me was his proposal that our best hope for renewal of the ethical order is "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us." It offered informed reasons for resisting the spread of the universal and homogenous culture that professors teach is the very essence of goodness.

MacIntyre deems the Enlightenment project entirely a disaster. Hume epitomized the spirit of the Enlightenment in the most famous passage in his writings. Hume argued that for an abstract idea to have any real meaning, we must be able to trace it back to experience. He writes, "When we run over libraries, persuaded of the principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume—of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask,

Does it contain any abstract reason concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

Hume's project began as an attempt to apply the methods of experimental science in philosophical inquiry—into the nature of the self, morality, God, and metaphysics itself. Admittedly, in doing so he ended up undermining the methodological foundations of that figure whom he wanted to emulate, Isaac Newton, and that rescuing Newton's science from Hume's attack became the aspiration of another figure in the Protestant Enlightenment, the incomparable Immanuel Kant. Nonetheless, the very aspiration epitomizes what Taylor intends by naturalistic approach to the study of morals and humanity. The destructive conclusion he arrived at typifies the devastation effect that the naturalist approach has had on the study of ethics and in "the sciences of man."

Hume writes:

in every system of morality which I have hitherto met with . . . the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning . . . when of a sudden I am surprised to find that, instead of the usual copulation of propositions *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* or *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought* or *ought not* expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and that at the same time a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others which are entirely different from it.

Whence the statement asserted by the sentence that appears at the beginning of the review came by the name "Hume's Law." The conviction that "is-statements" and "ought-statements" are categorically different, and that no set of "if-statements" can ever form a set of propositions from which an "ought-statement" can be deduced seems like a simple proposition of common sense.

However, it was not always so, and both Taylor and MacIntyre are at pains to track the dismantling of premodern conceptions of morality, which accorded values real ontological status and insisted that the nature imposed conditions on human behaviour and feeling. For MacIntyre (as for George Grant) the rupture occurred when we abandoned the teleological conception of reality. The classical conception of reality, the passing of which both MacIntyre and Grant lament, proposed the nature of humanity constitutes an ideal towards which men (and sometimes even women) might aspire. Human nature established ends towards which human beings could aspire and moral principles provided the means by which a human being might make the transition between what she is and what she can be. So too the structures of communities exemplified the order of *dike*, or justice; it was this that made participation in the polis a pedagogical activity through which human being approaches the ideal given in its nature.

On Taylor's account, the modern separation of the world into two ontological orders, mind and material world (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) was the decisive break, for it resulted in moderns coming to see mind and matter as shut up against one another. Once they had taken this step, they had not far to go before conceiving that value lies on the side of mind, not world. The subjectivist turn of modern existence thus was inaugurated.

From this derives the project of the justifying morality—the task of deriving 'ought-statements' from 'is-statements' Hume proclaimed to be impossible. Taylor's view is that

problem is similar to the famous mind-body problem, the problem of explaining the relation between two fundamentally different ontological orders.

Just as he took up the challenge of defending both our knowledge of reality and Newtonian science from the withering attacks of Hume, Kant took up the challenge of defending from Hume's attacks both the common principles of morality and his Lutheran sense of decency. He proposed, in a fashion that exemplifies the nature of modernity, to defend the latter out the nature of reason and the will alone. Practical reason needs no principles external to itself; it needs know nothing of experience or the make-up of reality. Kant's principle was simple, and for a time it must have seemed compelling: The will should adopt only those maxims that it can wish to be made universal without any incoherence resulting.

But it soon failed. And when it failed thinkers came to see moral principles as baseless as Hume foretold. The transition from Kant to Kierkegaard maps the transition from the modern view of morality, which adopted the programme of justifying morality, and the contemporary view. Kierkegaard realized that Kant's attempt at a rational justification of morality had failed. We make basic choices about our lives, Kierkegaard argued, and there are no reasons that can be given for choosing one form of life over another. We must commit ourselves to the basic principles that give our life form, and it is only when we have made such a commitment that other choices follow, as theorems follow in a chain from the axioms of a mathematical system. It is a tiny step from here to the banalities of sociologists that depict moral strife as a contest between incommensurate moral commitments that are merely the expression of a criterionless choice, a choice for which no rational justification can be given.

MacIntyre sees this teaching as intellectually and morally calamitous. He is correct in asserting that the propositions that values are product of our choices, and reflect nothing about the act or person evaluated, that different value commitments are incommensurate one with another is the "commonsense" of the present, in aesthetics as in morals.

That modernity is a sickness that imperils us all has become commonplace of cultural theory— not so much a commonplace that the politically correct don't rise up to excoriate those of us who promulgate it, as my experience with *The Cinema We Need* shows, but certainly not novel. I find it difficult to believe that these are not times that deserve the vision of Leonard Cohen's *The Future*. Reason and historical awareness compell us to acknowledge that the very human faculties needed to lift us out of the historical current that sweeps us toward universal destruction have been destroyed by this historical process itself.

Taylor realizes that the moral edict most esteemed in our time is that moral principles have universal application and that there is no ground in reason, nor in moral thinking itself, for discriminating between groups of people who deserve one kind of justice and other groups that deserve other kinds. Moderns, Taylor states, "feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and beneficence, are particularly 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." He rightly traces this view back to the Christian religious tradition of the West. Such liberal principles surely are the commonsense view of morality that moderns hold; and, as anyone who has much to do with the young and the politically correct must realize, their common interpretation have reduced them the merest banality.

That alone does not discredit them, to be sure. What I do find surprising from an erstwhile student of Herder is such generosity towards these claims as Taylor shows. For example, in *Reconciling the Solitudes* he writes:

The advantages of supernational collaboration are more and more evident to us.

These are partly economic and technological, as have been stressed in the European Community and in some of the arguments for maintaining Canadian unity. But they are also spiritual, in opening not only wider identification but also a plurality of poles of identification. This can help protect us from the stultifying, repressive obsession with the nation, which is one of the standing dangers of modern civilization. . . . In the best of all worlds [this is tantamount to saying it is revealed by reason and that the reason does not accord a key role to situation in the forming of political ideals; *ergo* universalizable R.B.E.], nations would not have to become states. It should be one of their options (self-determination) but not the top option. A higher aspiration is supranational unity, following the best of the modern political tradition. (p. 58)

The question of the goodness of the universal homogenous state was made central to modern political theory by Alexandre Kojève and Leo Strauss, in the debate around Strauss' notes to his commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*, entitled *On Tyranny*. Kojève was an Hegelian and his interpretation of Hegel helped that most troubling of Hegel's great books, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, the central place it has in modern Hegel studies. As an Hegelian (of however wonky a brand), he saw history as culminating in a universal homogenous state of universal freedom, in which the Absolute has come to full self-recognition.

Strauss' view was considerably darker, but it seems to me it was a frightening prognostication. Strauss offers the following comments in 1948 about the Universal Tyrant who will reign when the universal, homogeneous state comes into being; because they amount to a chilling description of the present, I quote at some length:

To retain his power, he will be forced to suppress every activity which might lead people into doubt of the essential soundness of the universal and homogenous state . . . In particular, he must in the interest of the homogeneity of his universal state forbid every teaching, every suggestion that there are politically relevant natural differences among men which cannot be abolished or neutralized by progressing scientific technology.

Is this not the character of the present? Is it not the official word of our intellectual institutions that any teaching that there are natural and morally relevant differences among human beings must be forbidden? And this comes at the very time when professional "thinkers" celebrate globalization and multiculturalism in the same breath, to ensure we understand them to mean that no differences among cultures should really make a difference, at least so far as politics and morality are concerned.

If this was not prescience enough, Strauss went on to point out that in this circumstance, the thinker will not be able to escape to a happier set of circumstances:

Thanks to the conquest of nature and to the completely unabashed substitution of suspicion and terror for law [think how often you have heard the hermeneutics of suspicion hymned in this past decade R.B.E.], the Universal and Final Tyrant has at his disposal practically unlimited means for ferreting out, and for extinguishing, the most modest efforts in the direction of thought . . . the coming of the universal and homogeneous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.

Chilling, but an exact description of the present. Or so it seems to me.

Taylor's conclusions are not so dark. What more than anything unites the essays in *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism* and *The Malaise of Modernity* (and those two works with *Sources of the Self* and *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*) is Taylor's agenda, which he says can be defined not "not as limiting or slowing down the progress of modern values, but rather as finding a way to rescue them in their integrity, as against the distortions and perversions that have developed in modern history." He even calls authenticity a powerful ideal.

One might have expected that Taylor would have produced a more gloomy analysis of universalism in human relations after confronting the Mulroney years that saw the evisceration of Canada, the dystopia of "globalization" celebrated by a pseudo-Hegelian theorist who works for the American State Department (and who seems oblivious that at the end of history, there would be nothing more for humans to do, and that it is only through the power of negation released in bloody struggle or by real work that true human being emerges.) Why does his writing lack (or how does it escape) the gloomy tone of George Grant's view of modernity, or Heidegger's, or MacIntyre's?

Taylor's optimism becomes even more surprising when one considers that his arguments concerning identity, while original, have roots in the ideas of Hegel and Herder. *Sources of the Self*, *The Malaise of Modernity*, and *Reconciling the Solitudes* are communitarian texts. Taylor offers arguments in them against the liberalism's atomistic view of the individual. The arguments he offers are essentially Hegelian arguments that show the liberal conception of the self is incoherent and that our identity can only come to be by our being accorded recognition by another. He supplements these Hegelian arguments with others that derive from Herder and concern the role that language plays in shaping identity. But suppose our language is debased, essentially a volapuk, a rational construct that can no longer do what Herder believed language does, i.e., reflect the richness of the natural environment and of our interactions with others. Would not the identity that such a language brings into being be virtually phantasmal, a ghostly simulacrum of what human being might be? How does Taylor sustain his optimism?

To say that Taylor's Christianity is responsible is tempting, but it would be only half-right. After all, Grant (even though he did deny that his views were pessimistic by saying that no true Christian can be a pessimist) was and MacIntyre is also Christian, and Heidegger deeply spiritual. One might propose, too, that, although Taylor is not a disciple of Hegel, it was the influence of Hegel that led him to this sanguine conclusion. Hegel certainly had a keen sense of the travails of the historical process; after all, that issue provoked from him the resounding sentence that I pride myself for having taught my colleagues in film to quote at the slightest provocation: "History is a slaughter-bench on which whole nations are sacrificed." But he also saw History as a Bacchanalian revel, in which dismemberment and sacrifice grounds for exuberant joy. For history is a developmental process marked by increases in freedom and in the Absolute's self-knowledge. Through philosophic reflection humans become aware of the situation in which they find themselves, for the work of philosophy is to frame an account of the actuality in which the philosopher lives. But to become aware of the nature of their situation, philosophers must distinguish between the actual and ideal; it is the difference between the actual and the ideal that drives the historical process and through which the actual is negated to bring forth something more like the ideal. The actual work of negation is the task of the World Historical Individual, a figure who plays on the political stage, but it is the philosopher who counsels the politician on the true meaning of historical situations.

The idea that the actual finds its meaning in the ideal, that the lover of wisdom endeavors to understand and to actualize the idea, that the philosopher engages with his lived circumstances and even that the philosopher plays a role in the historical process are ideas that Taylor has spoken. So there is more than that proposal that the first. However, I do not think that this is the most fundamental reason for Taylor's generous disposition.

Nor is the reason for Taylor's sanguinity that he does not believe in real change. His view of history is not that change is an illusion and so values cannot really waste away through time, that what was once, is and always shall be. Taylor believes there are real differences among eras and cultures as this is the fact that makes understanding different eras and cultures so challenging.

However Taylor does not want to suggest that these differences entail a version of cultural relativism. He proposes instead a project that we might describe as archeological, for he examines the cultural, and especially the philosophical, theological and sometimes devotional and artistic artifacts of culture in an effort to excavate a conceptual substructure. A strong culture will then be seen as a whole. Its views on nature—nonanimate, animate, human and divine—will be seen to be coherent. Exposing that a rational structure holds together various features of a culture in an all-embracing structure serves as a counterargument to the nihilistic tendencies of more fashion-conscious cultural theorists.

Taylor believes the historical process proceeds neither by accretion nor by truncation. The course of history is neither steady progress towards an ideal nor continual falling farther away from the ideal. Nonetheless, change is real, and different eras have different conceptual substructures. To understand another era or culture, we must excavate that culture's hermeneutical substructure.

This Foucauldian turn allows Taylor to accept the Hegelian affirmation of the reality of history without sinking into nihilism or cultural relativism. Alasdair MacIntyre considers that the distinctive traits of the modern age result from the repudiation of the paradigm that maintained that values had their ground in an order of existence and that there was a harmony between the order of being and the order of value. It is this repudiation, he says, that explains why the modern era views moral debate simply as a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment as the criterionless choice between premises for which no justification can be given.

Taylor does not concur, for he does not believe that the moral premises of different eras or different cultures are wholly incommensurate. One must do much work to understand what the Greeks meant by reason and how it relates to the Good; but it is not impossible, given sufficient effort, to understand the conceptual substructure of those conceptions, or to go some way towards understanding which relations within that conceptual structure were strongly conceived and which more weakly.

The deepest importance of Taylor's work is to offer a different idea of moral reasoning. In *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin points out the universalist arguments that thinkers of the sixteenth century framed had the purpose of putting an end to the destabilizing conflicts of their times. The hope for rational methods founded on indubitable truths to which all must assent, for a unified science that to which all researchers would contribute and so would show a sure and steady growth and exact language that (like the incorruptible aesthetic forms of essentialist theorists) would make error manifest and truth more easy to pursue was to purify the operation of human reason by decontextualizing it, i.e., by cutting its ties with particular historical and cultural circumstances. Consider Leibniz' proposal for a *characteristica universalis* that would apply to all fields and would allow disputes in any field to

be resolved by calculation. In moral argument, this led directly to the universalism of Kantian ethics, which Kant established by reason alone, in particular, the imperative of avoiding contradiction.

It is the conception of moral argument associated with this project that Taylor rejects. Some of his best writing has been to point out the reasons that a conception of reasoning that takes scientific reasoning as a paradigm is inapplicable in the humanities and social sciences. In the various essays in *Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, Taylor shows, in myriad different (and often startlingly insightful) ways, that “a being [such as human being] that exists only in self-interpretations cannot be understood absolutely; and a being [such as human being] that can be understood only against a background of distinctions of worth cannot be captured in a scientific language.”

Taylor trenchantly picks apart the idea of subjecting moral arguments to the foundationalist methods of modern science, philosophy and psychology. Reasoning has different features in different domains, Taylor suggests, and we should not seek for the foundations for moral theory, for we do not reason from fundamental principles when we form moral arguments. Moral arguments are transitional, not absolute. Rather than arguing that basic principles show action ‘X’ to be absolutely the best thing that ‘A’ might do in a given situation, we argue that X is preferable to Y, all things considered—and that by accepting this our interlocutor would work to improve matters, however slightly.

Associated with this is Taylor’s belief that moral arguments are more of the nature of conversations than of demonstrations *more geometrico*. This is not because Taylor espouses the fashionable view that moral statements have only illocutionary force—that they are attempts to persuade others that some act is good or some motive bad that say nothing about the nature of what moral judgement intends. Rather it is because moral arguments touch on the very conditions of identity and our being and because we achieve our identity during exchanges with other human beings. Moral argumentation involves an encounter with another human or other humans and such encounters shape us as a human being.

Secondly, Taylor sees moral discussion as being hermeneutical, not foundationalist. When we frame a moral argument, we do not petition to first principles. Rather, we place an action (or a motive or a character) against a background and try to show that seen in this way, it could mark a gain or loss for freedom or for justice or for kindness. Often, when situating acts, motives or characters against a background, we employ the categories and structures of narrative.

A strength of Taylor’s method is that interpretative arguments are more sensitive to the context of the object of interpretation than foundationalist arguments are. Toulmin and Taylor have provided demonstrations of the limitations of decontextualized reason in human understanding. Furthermore, the interpretative method offers a valuable response to the question, “If we cannot justify our moral principles using the principles of pure reason alone, then how might we?”

Nietzsche concluded that we simply cannot. In the absence of a fundamental justification for morality, we must recognize that humans create values and can, through the famous “transvaluation of values,” change them. Taylor offers a different answer, one that does lead to the nihilism that Strauss calls “the second crisis of modernity—the crisis of our times.” He does not propose to justify moral principles out of pure reason, but to show how it is possible, as some interpreters consider Hegel to do, to explain how the concepts by which we understand moral arguments came to be what they are, and this to give grounds to the concepts we use to make sense of moral statements.

The basic reason for Taylor's comparative sanguinity on the moral condition of modernity relates to his using narrative as an interpretive category. His hermeneutical deployment of his conception of history as narrative does not produce nearly so dramatic a tale as Hegel's; he does not suggest that history, through all the conflicts it encounters on its path, progresses towards either a comic or tragic outcome (i.e., in favour of, or against its protagonist.)

The particular narrative that Taylor offers to lessen our despair over the moral condition of modernity—despair that he describes with real eloquence in the opening chapter of *The Malaise of Modernity*—depicts the modern era as marking a transition from heteronomy to autonomy and, in Taylor's view, given a strong enough notion of freedom (i.e., a view of freedom different from that of liberal political theory) the idea of autonomy is, as he states in *The Malaise of Modernity*, a strong basis for morality.

I cannot share his view on this. First, I do not believe that any hermeneutical exercise is involved in moral recognition. Donald Davidson has proposed a hermeneutical theory of action similar in many ways to Taylor's hermeneutical morality concerning our understanding of other people's behaviour. We understand a person's behaviour (including his or her speech) because we fit a theory which explains what he or she is doing in terms of beliefs, desires and intention. Many have argued that it cannot be that we interpose a mental construct, an hypothesis, that mediates our recognition of others' doings and sayings. I would argue similarly against Taylor's interpretive theory (and in favour of some form of intuitionism.)

Second, I cannot accept his hermeneutical use of history as narrative, nor his conception of narrative as the basic structure that we use to formulate an integrated conception that binds events that occur through time. For one thing, I do not think narrative affords sufficient scope for contingency in the changes that historical paradigms undergo or for the plurality of historical shifts that are always taking place. It channels history into a single, teleologically structured developmental process.

Another danger with this view is that it leads too easily into the trap of identifying temporal succession with logical succession. And yet another difficulty is that this conception sees time as linear and models succession on causality (and so temporal and logical succession come to be identified with causal succession.) This model of causal succession, I believe, is a reflection of human willing and that another temporal model, based on *Gelassenheit* is a stronger conception of time (though I have not enough space to state my reasons.) Because causal succession in narrative mirrors human willing, narrative privileges those conceptions of the universe with humans at the centre. Above any other purpose, this conception of time has as its end sharpening the distinction between history and nature, for that conception was essential to the Greeks' overcoming a fearful sense of the universe as having little interest in human well-being and as being irrational. This explains why artists regularly resort to nonnarrative forms when they strive to convey how human and nonhuman nature arise together, unfolding their beings within a single embrace. What is important for thinkers, however, is the question whether the predramatic, prenarrative sense of nature is not more true than the later account and whether the latter account simply rationalizes nature so as to ensure that nonhuman nature stands before consciousness as something that we can control so that it serves our end. Surrendering our massive investment in narrative is the price I think we would have to pay to loosen ourselves from modernity's conception of relation between nature and human will.

To say what I can about this topic in this brief compass is to make a cartoon of my thinking, but I shall pay that cost. Narrative seems to rest on a conception of time that affords those values through which we become truly human no place to dwell. Modernity and narrative are closely interrelated—so closely related that narrative is the exemplary form of the modern

era. The pleasures of rhyme and meter—the pattern on which all temporally extended, nonnarrative forms are based—is the pleasure of awaiting the constant return of the same-within-difference. The experience of the return of the same-within-difference calls forth a different mode of temporal experience than narrative does; and I believe it not one bit hyperbolic to suggest that a culture whose experience of time is time as narrative would result in the production of *Terminator I, II, III, IV etc.*, or (that film so beloved by professors of movies), *Texas Chainsaw Massacres*, and (another favorite of the professors of movies) *Raging Bull* or that ours is an era that mobilize all forces within its reach to destroy any art which refuses the condition of narrative and all those artists whose works do not reflect that experience of time as causal succession.

I sometimes say, aware of the element of hyperbole, that history, long ill, went into its death throes when literature departments allowed the teaching of novels. But I also say this largely in earnest. A person who reads a novel of an evening will develop a different experience of time than a person who reads verse—or, better yet, hears it recited aloud (if only on a gramophone recording.) When one listens to a piece of Bach, the experience of same returning through an endless sheen of difference, one is opened to a new, and profoundly important experience of time. Our culture does what does what can to ensure that experience is not available to people. It mobilizes an intellectual response to meaning instead of a sensuous and affective response to form. But the principal agency it deploys is narrative.

A hermeneutic that rests on a narrative model can see modernity as untroubled at its core only because it is tied to a model that relates time to willing. I, on the other hand, believe that the subjects that arise in an era in which art and thought are so shrunken they cannot preserve the potentialities that Taylor conceives they have. They can be only what Nietzsche's dark description depicts them as, "last men" who have accepted modernity's ideas of universal freedom, equality and happiness, but who live without a sense of what human greatness might be. They therefore cannot despise themselves.

Second, I believe that Taylor's conception of the anthropogenic effects of mutual recognition is itself troublingly universalistic—and is this in two ways. First, I believe that conception underestimates the effect that specific conditions may have on the process through which subjects are formed. A weaker cultural situation can offer only debilitating beings and relations with debilitated others, and such debilitated relations surely will not bring forth strong selves.

Third, I believe that process more ordinary than is commonly recognized, and more affected by the simple realities of our everyday circumstances. Our exchanges with others shape us into the beings we become because they involve mutual recognition of the humanity of those who participate in the exchange. The recognition can occur only when the participants share with them a dialectic, a pattern of intonation and cadence, a way of holding our bodies and of gesturing. The material of communication is probably more humanizing than the messages themselves; the way that another opens him or herself towards you or turns away, or the intonational patterns she or he uses reveals more about his or her feelings towards you than what she says. And this language is not universal, but a highly encoded, and highly specific set of dialectics.

The anomie that characterizes modern life results in the minimization of this aspect of communication as fewer and fewer of our encounters with others involve these dialectics in our dialogue. Our dialogues are less humanizing.

