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Critical Remarks on *The Sources of the Self* by Charles Taylor

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It is praise, not dispraise, to remark of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* that its importance lies in part in its incompleteness, in its enabling us to identify how much else needs to be done, if Taylor's central claims are to be vindicated. Those claims are fourfold. A first set concern the ways in which our "identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which" we "can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done..." (p. 27). A second set comprises a defence of the objectivity of such judgments, both about types of good and about what is good or bad in particular situations. Naturalistic reductions and subjectivist and projectivist accounts of good and goods all fail (pp. 53–62).

Taylor's third set of claims are embodied in three narratives about those ideas through which distinctive modern conceptions of the self and of its goods were developed, so that the self achieved a new kind of identity. The first such idea is that of the peculiar inwardness of modern postCartesian subjectivity and of corresponding conceptions of rationality. A second concerns what Taylor conceives as a peculiarly modern affirmation of everyday life, of the life of production and reproduction. And a third focusses upon the postEnlightenment tension between the naturalistic humanism of the Enlightenment and the Romantic invocation of nature as the source of the self's powers. Collectively these narratives introduce a fourth culminating set of theses, in which Taylor both stresses and praises the richness of a distinctively modern identity.

This richness is defined by reference to "the need to recognize a plurality of goods, and hence often of conflicts, which other views tend to mask by delegitimizing one of the goods in contest" (p. 518). These conflicts are not a sign that one of the goods in question is not really a good: "The goods may be in conflict, but for all that they don't refute each other" (p. 502). What these goods are has been disclosed by the three central narratives and the range of goods consequently to be acknowledged is impressive. That allegiance to

some of these goods has produced great evils is not due to their not being goods: “following one good to the end may be catastrophic, not because it isn’t a good, but because there are others which can’t be sacrificed without evil” (p. 503). Taylor is at once a pluralist and a realist about goods.

Upholders of moral realism, such as Taylor, have reason to be grateful to subjectivist and projectivist theorists. From their standpoint what such theorists provide are accounts of the nature of *mistaken* judgments about goods. And that many judgments about goods are mistaken is something surely required by any plausible realist theory. What any realist theorist needs to provide then are criteria for distinguishing those cases for which either a subjectivist or a projectivist account is justified and those where either lacks application. But Taylor’s theorizing not only fails to provide such criteria, it seems peculiarly ill-equipped to do so. “What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs,” Taylor asks, “than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives?” (p. 57). And he argues that in the assessment and in the explanation of action, as well as in practical deliberation, to treat a wide range of goods as ‘real’ is something to which we “cannot help having recourse” (p. 59), just because the terms in which we do this make the “best sense” (p. 58) of our lives.

There are however on the face of it just too many rival ways in which sense can be made out of lives, each involving different and apparently incompatible conceptions of and judgments about goods; and it is not clear what Taylor would say at this point. Does his insistence that the claims upon us of one set of (genuine) goods do not “refute” the claims of a rival set, rival in that contingent circumstances compel us to choose between them, suggest that it is in terms of some overall coherence of every genuine claim about goods with every other that the genuine good is to be distinguished from the deceptive simulacrum? And, if so, how is reliance upon such a coherence in our claims and our beliefs as a criterion to be reconciled with Taylor’s realism? Taylor’s arguments are incomplete until he has either answered these questions or shown that they are not the right questions to ask.

A second difficulty arises from Taylor’s insistence that we do on important occasions have to choose between goods. For presumably in making such choices we express no more than our personal preferences. But insofar as this is so, although our judgments that “Such and such is good” may be true and realistically construable, our judgments that “Out of the goods which could now be pursued *this* is the good to be pursued” will have to be construed in subjectivist or emotivist terms. Taylor asserts that in so choosing we do not “refute” the claim of the goods which we have chosen not to follow to be genuine goods. But with the wide range of alternative goods identified by Taylor, what makes a choice between them rational? Until Taylor provides a compelling answer to this question, his narrative of the modern

self remains open to an alternative interpretation, one in which the multiplication of goods, and of the alternative possibilities of realizing different sets of goods in different types of life, gradually frees the self from commitment to any one such set or type of life and leaves it bereft of criteria, confronting a choice of type of life from an initial standpoint in which the self seems to be very much what Sartre took it to be. That this conclusion would be unacceptable to Taylor is clear. What is not clear is which of the premises which jointly entail it he would deny and upon what grounds.

Taylor's historical narratives present another set of problems. His philosophical account of the modern self and the continuities of its development is presented as if deriving support from those narratives. But those narratives are interpretative, and the interpretation which informs them seems to be itself derived from that same philosophical account for which the narratives are intended to provide support. Perhaps this hermeneutic circularity is ineliminable. But we only have good reason to endorse Taylor's interpretation of the relevant histories, if we have matched its claims against those made for at least some rival interpretations of the same subject-matter, something which Taylor omits to do.

Consider as just one example Taylor's treatment of those rebellious modernist writers whose critique of modernity from within, if taken seriously, might not only undermine Taylor's account of that in the modern self which he praises, but also disrupt the continuities of his narrative, writers such as Pound, Eliot and Joyce. One difficulty which such writers seem to pose for that narrative is that they rejected Cartesian and postCartesian subjectivity, that their portrayals of the relationship of the self to its body and to society, different as these are from writer to writer, share a rejection of distinctively modern notions of inwardness and consciousness. Taylor flatly denies this on the grounds that although they may "have seen themselves as getting outside the subject again," this is done in a way which continues "the radically reflexive nature of the modernist enterprise" (pp. 480–81). What Taylor does not pause to consider is whether what has to be meant in calling what these writers achieve "reflexive" may not be very different from what is meant when that word is applied to the heirs of the Cartesian picture of the self.

Cartesian reflection of the self on the self is always presented as internal to consciousness, a reflection upon what is immediately given, and given only to the subject him or herself. Contrast with this a more Thomistic account of self-knowledge according to which the self is able to make of itself an object, reflecting in a secondary way upon its own primary operations and able so to reflect upon others as well as itself, so that the inner loses its Cartesian privileges. Here is a different kind of reflexiveness and one much more plausibly to be ascribed to Eliot, Pound and Joyce, who are therefore to be understood as providing not a continuation of, but rather both a repudia-

tion and a critique of postCartesian reflexiveness and inwardness. Where Taylor sees continuity, there is on this rival interpretation rupture.

Here once again Taylor has to do more, if he is to sustain his case. It is a compliment to so long a book that one should want it to be even longer.