

Today and tomorrow

*Charles Taylor*, Ruth Abbey, Philosophy Now series, Acumen, Guildford and King's Lynn, 2000. vi + 250 pp., £40.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 1-902683-06-4 hb., 1-902683-07-2 pb.

The Philosophy Now series promises to combine rigorous analysis with authoritative expositions. Ruth Abbey's book lives up to this demand by being a clear, reliable and more than up-to-date introduction to Charles Taylor's philosophy. Although it is an introductory book, the amount of footnotes and references ought to please those who want to study the original texts more closely. Abbey's book is structured thematically: morality, selfhood, politics and epistemology get 50 pages each. The focus is on the internal coherence of Taylor's work, not in its critique of or defence against other positions. The chapters are self-containing, but together they give a good total picture of Taylor's position. The concluding chapter is a highly interesting preview of Taylor's unpublished work-in-progress on secularity, which according to Abbey is comparable in magnitude to *Sources of the Self*.

Some interpreters have taken Taylor for a full-fledged historicist, while others have stressed the role of human constants and transcendental arguments in his work. Against these, Abbey sees Taylor as a proponent of a two-dimensional analysis of selfhood: both ontological features and historical features are central. In the modern horizon, the contents of self-interpretations include such historically evolved ideals as autonomy, inwardness, authenticity, affirmation of ordinary life, benevolence and avoidance of suffering. The ontological dimension concerns humans as purposive, embodied agents. In any historical situation, humans as linguistic beings are self-interpreting animals and strong evaluators, and their identities are dialogically constituted. Abbey notes critically that this ontological dimension of Taylor's account is not too clear and specific when it comes to bioethical borderline cases.

Abbey approaches Taylor's moral theory from the viewpoint of human constants: as strong evaluators, humans inescapably have implicit or explicit moral frameworks, which contain a plurality of goods. There has been some debate whether Taylor's notion of strong evaluator applies to unreflective people as well. Abbey's analysis of strong evaluations is in this respect very clear and well argued: strong evaluations are qualitative distinctions of worth, which may but need not be reflective and which may but need not govern such everyday choices as a choice between diets. Further, the adjective "strong" refers to the qualitative worth of evaluations, not their force or motivational power. Thus everyone, even unreflective people, have strong evaluations.

In contrast, Abbey suggests that only some moral frameworks include what Taylor calls hypergoods. These are "supreme among strongly valued goods" which "become hegemonic in one's life" (35). Abbey's example is someone protesting against logging in a redwood forest because of a strong dedication to environmental values. The protester does not deny other goods like education, world peace, individual liberty and socioeconomic justice, but these are not hegemonic in her life, and so forest preservation is her hypergood. Because all of us do not structure our lives around ethical goals, Abbey concludes that some of us do not have hypergoods at all. Against this, as Abbey points out, most interpreters have taken Taylor's claim to be that hypergoods are a universal feature of moral life. For every moral agent, some good is the most strongly valued one. Taylor sees a very close connection between 'most strongly valued goods' and 'hegemonic goals in one's identity'. A follower of Rorty might think that education, world peace, individual liberty and socioeconomic justice are the most important goods, and yet the hegemonic goal in one's identity might be to sustain ironical distance towards these goods one nevertheless lives by. In this case it would be hard to say whether the notion 'hypergood' would refer to what is ethically most valued or

what is most central to one's identity. Abbey's suggestion seems to be that while such a person would have strong evaluations, he would have no hypergoods.

Abbey locates Taylor's moral realism between what she calls strong and weak realism. Weak realism claims that people merely *experience* moral values as real and independent but this experience is an error: in fact values are only subjective projections onto a neutral world. Strong realism holds that values are objective and real whether or not humans experience them in that way. In contrast, Taylor thinks we ought to accept the theory, which makes the best sense of what people in fact experience: moral realism.

Abbey calls Taylor's moral realism "falsifiable realism". This is a bit unfortunate label, because it fails to distinguish between Taylor's realism in natural sciences and in morality. Taylor would not deny that also natural scientific theories are falsifiable. Yet Taylor thinks that morality and natural sciences are, as Abbey points out, diametrically opposed to each other in almost every other respect. Morality can be grasped only from the engaged perspective of moral agents, whereas in modern natural sciences a disengaged perspective is adopted. Moral values, like secondary properties, are relational, unlike the independent objects of natural sciences. Further, language has a constitutive role in shaping or manifesting the moral dimension. Thus Taylor's moral realism is phenomenological, falsifiable, relational and manifestationist, while his realism in natural sciences is non-phenomenological, non-relational and non-manifestationist, but nevertheless falsifiable.

Having read the book, it remained unclear to me what Abbey and Taylor think of the relation between a 'moral source' and a historical source. Taylor calls a 'moral source' something that both constitutes the goodness of ordinary values and motivates us to act morally. He names three possible modern moral sources: human capacities, nature and God. According to Taylor's theory (although not according to his own hunches) it seems to be theoretically possible that for example the value of autonomy has historically Christian roots but at the same time the genuine moral source of autonomy is the human capacity to moral self-determination. This would mean that connecting a moral ideal to its moral source would be different from connecting the same ideal to its historical sources. If I got it right, in Abbey's analysis Taylor's goal is to recover theism as a moral source by stressing the fact that Christianity has been a historical source for many ideals.

The chapter on politics deals with Taylor's position on the liberal-communitarian debate. Taylor's suggestion that advocacy issues and ontological issues ought not to be assimilated has led some people to interpret Taylor as a communitarian on the ontological level and a liberal of some kind on the advocacy level. Abbey accepts this when it comes to ontology, but thinks this is too simple on the advocacy level. Taylor is rather a pluralist who affirms both communitarian and liberal goals, and rejects both unitary communitarianism and unitary liberalism. In addition, Taylor criticises some liberal goals like neutrality or negative freedom. Abbey's interpretation is sound in general, but the hermeneutical highlight of this chapter is the way Abbey shows that in "Politics of Recognition", "Taylor is also continuing his dialogue with [Isaiah] Berlin, despite the fact that his name appears nowhere in the article" (135). It is indeed illuminating to see Taylor's essay as replying to his former teacher's views on recognition.

The chapter on knowledge contains a seemingly disparate variety of issues, from the distinctions between human and natural sciences to the scientific revolution and to theories of language. What holds these together is Taylor's thesis of the priority of the engaged, embodied perspective. The disengaged perspective aiming at objective knowledge purged from subjective coloration has proved successful in modern natural sciences, but nevertheless it remains a local achievement. The disengaged perspective should not be ontologized by taking it to be a general structure of human

mind nor should it be smuggled into human sciences. According to Taylor, such ontologizations and smugglings, and the ethical ideals that support them, have a tremendous hold in modern culture. Taylor's struggle against naturalistic reductions is a major theme also in his theories of selfhood, morality and politics. Self-interpretations, strong evaluations, communitarian ties between people, shared goods or reality of values might be quite trivial things were there not such an influential worldview questioning whether there is room for these in the best ontology.

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