

Taylor and Liberal Naturalism

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Just as some cousins resemble each other more than they do members of their immediate family, so there are liberal naturalists who appear to have more in common with certain relatives than they do with themselves. Compare two of the most prominent self-conscious proponents of liberal naturalism (LN), Richard Rorty and John McDowell, with one of the most prominent self-conscious proponents of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both Rorty and McDowell are impressed by Gadamer's formulation of the thought that truth cannot be reduced to procedures, and in particular by his account of why the objective procedures of modern science are partial or incomplete in their delivery of truth (Rorty 1980, McDowell 1994, Gadamer 1993 [1960]). But whereas Rorty takes the partiality or incompleteness of scientific truth, as shown by Gadamer, to amount to the limited utility of the scientific method, which itself is quite heterogeneous, McDowell takes it to reflect the broader scope of truth as a goal of enquiry, a goal not to be tied exclusively to the codifiable procedures of the modern sciences, but which is shared by other more or less formalizable discourses and forms of understanding. Whereas Rorty reads Gadamer as a proto-pragmatist showing us how to get by without a notion of 'the Truth', McDowell reads him as a neo-Aristotelian showing us how to find truth in places the codifiable methods of the modern sciences cannot reach. Whoever is right on this matter, most readers of *Truth and Method* would agree that McDowell's views on it are much closer to Gadamer's than they are to Rorty's. From this angle at least, McDowell resembles his hermeneutic cousin more than his liberal naturalist sibling.

Gadamer is not the only member of the hermeneutic family who could easily be mistaken for a liberal naturalist. Another is Charles Taylor. All the distinctive features of LN seem to be there in Taylor's writings. Taylor wholeheartedly endorses the liberal naturalist conception of reality as containing more kinds of thing than the kind posited by successful scientific explanations. Indeed, Taylor is one of the foremost critics of the opposing thesis, the reductive naturalist one, that the only 'really real' things are those of a kind that are posited by natural science. Not only are we led to posit the existence of many more kinds of thing than a physicist or biologist would typically posit in seeking to understand and explain human affairs, Taylor argues, but also the attempt to restrict our 'posits' to those of a kind a physicist or biologist would accept can distort our understanding of the phenomena at hand and blind us to the best explanations of them. Taylor is famous for his view that we should allow our ontology, the things we take to be real, to be guided by our 'best account' of the phenomena, without any *a priori* restriction on the kind of concept or type of vocabulary that should feature in that account (Taylor 1989). If, in accounting for human actions and the course of human lives, the best we can do is draw on moral concepts and common sense, we shouldn't flinch at the conclusion that moral concepts and common sense really do inform us about human reality. We should allow our ontology of the human to be shaped by them. And throughout his work Taylor has sought to show that the best accounts we can offer of many aspects of human life do indeed need to be couched in broadly speaking moral concepts, concepts that relate us to 'the good', and that without such concepts we would be all at sea in attempting to understand and explain these aspects of human life. Arguably, no one has done more than Taylor to expose the inadequacy of attempts at explaining human history, politics, culture, religion and so on independently of such concepts; he is as consistent and vehement a critic of the folly of modelling the humanities exclusively on the hard sciences as any avowed liberal naturalist (Taylor 1985a, 1985b). In his insistence on the equal epistemological

standing of the humanities and the hard sciences, and in this sense the compatibility between the ‘manifest image’ projected by the former and the ‘scientific image’ constructed by the latter, again Taylor looks like a liberal naturalist natural.

As a critic of reductive scientific naturalism (SN), Taylor’s liberal naturalist credentials are impeccable. Taylor’s distinctive contribution to the liberal naturalist outlook, I will suggest, lies largely in his distinctive critique of SN, the naturalism in opposition to which LN defines itself. As just mentioned, Taylor shares the liberal naturalist repudiation of the reductive, monistic epistemology and ontology of SN, and he endorses the more open-ended, pluralist conception of knowledge and reality characteristic of LN. But Taylor has his own reasons for rejecting SN, and in particular, he has his own account of why SN seems to ‘hold us captive’ despite the many criticisms that can be made of its central epistemological and ontological claims (Taylor 1995). Taylor is surely right in his view that, if the critique of SN is to be effective, it can’t rest content with a list of that kind of naturalism’s errors and mistakes. It must also account for the persistent appeal of SN, an appeal it has despite the shortcomings liberal naturalists and others persistently draw attention to. We can call critique of the latter type, critique that does not just criticise but also shows up the appeal of the criticised standpoint and the motivation behind it, ‘genealogical’ critique. Genealogical critique is typically historical because the motivation behind a deep-rooted philosophical standpoint is typically deep-rooted historically: the motivation, the source of the appeal, is not a sudden, out-of-the-blue occurrence, but has come from somewhere, it has a history. Taylor’s distinctive contribution to LN, I am suggesting, consists largely in his genealogical critique of SN, in his attempt to *historicise* the naturalism in opposition to which LN defines itself. We will return to this critique shortly.

But LN does not just define itself in opposition to SN: it is an opposition to SN which is also opposed to ‘supernaturalism’. The liberality of the liberal naturalist allows her to

admit into her ontology the kind of thing we refer to when talking common sense, competently doing humanities subjects, or making and criticising works of art (de Caro and Macarthur 2004). But the liberal naturalist acknowledges the need for *some* border control: there is no place for ‘supernatural’ entities in her ontology. Likewise, while the liberal naturalist is by disposition epistemologically relaxed, and comfortable with affording epistemic status to a variety of discourses and practices in the humanities and the arts as well as the natural sciences, she stiffens up when it comes to superstition or practices that systematically violate the principles of modern natural science. The supernatural and the superstitious are as much out of bounds for the liberal naturalist as they are for the scientific naturalist. The same holds for philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition such as Taylor and Gadamer. Philosophical hermeneutics is in no way motivated by an urge to reinstate the enchanted conception of nature that preceded the Galilean transformation of science, as if the veil of disenchantment could be lifted by some epistemological conjuring trick, allowing the world of spirits and demons to reveal itself once more. As indicated above, philosophical hermeneutics, as developed by Gadamer and Taylor amongst others, is a form of scientific realism, which means that it takes reality to be (in part) what the most successful sciences of nature, namely the post-Galilean ones, show it to be (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). But in not ruling out enchantment by *other means*, in embracing realism not just about science but about the humanities, the arts, ethics and even forms of religious self-understanding, Taylor might appear to be letting the ‘supernatural’ in through the back door, so to speak, and in that light might look like a covert ‘supernaturalist’. The worry is that while Taylor’s attempt at ‘retrieving realism’ looks fine and consistent with LN when it comes to the claims of the empirical sciences and common sense, it is too accommodating of supernaturalism, and perhaps superstition, when it comes to other kinds of claim, such as general philosophical claims about the self or the nature of human agency, and those pressed in works of moral,

artistic and religious imagination where what Taylor calls ‘constitutive goods’ and ‘moral sources’ are at stake (Taylor 1989, 2011).

The suspicion that Taylor’s hermeneutics is a form of covert supernaturalism, and thus not a form of LN, is no doubt reinforced by Taylor’s many avowals of his Catholic faith since the publication of *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 2007, 2011). And this might even lead us to question the bona fide character of the critique of SN conducted in that book, which I am suggesting is Taylor’s most distinctive contribution to LN. If, as is now apparent to everyone, Taylor’s genealogy of SN had a retrieval of theistic moral sources in view, does that not compromise it from a liberal naturalist standpoint? And more generally, does Taylor’s alternative to SN, considered independently of his Catholic confession, show tell-tale signs of an underlying supernaturalism?

Historicizing naturalism

To answer these questions, let’s first consider the thrust of Taylor’s genealogical critique of SN. As noted above, genealogical critique targets the underlying appeal of a philosophical outlook, an appeal that need not be diminished by well-considered objections to the outlook’s distinctive epistemological and metaphysical claims. Such critique becomes apt when the original motivation for the outlook is forgotten, or when the outlook becomes so culturally entrenched that alternatives to it, which must once have existed, become difficult to formulate. Taylor believes that SN is such a culturally entrenched outlook, the original motivation for which has been forgotten even – indeed especially – by its most ardent defenders. The point of the critique is to retrieve, by way of a historical reconstruction, the original appeal and underlying motivation behind SN. If successful, the critique will show that the appeal of SN properly comes to view only once the standpoint of SN is abandoned.

Since LN understands itself as the most viable alternative to SN - the rival to SN that doesn't rely on supernaturalism - such an historicizing strategy looks well-suited to the liberal naturalist project.

It seems clear that the appeal of SN has a lot to do with the power and prestige of modern natural science and technology. One might challenge this or that epistemological or metaphysical thesis put forward by the scientific naturalist, but one cannot argue with the success of modern science or the effectiveness of modern technology. If, in challenging SN, one seems to put in doubt the success and effectiveness of science and technology, one has already lost the argument. This is part of what it means to say that SN is deeply entrenched in the culture of modernity, the culture that provides the background for both SN and LN. But while the power and prestige of modern science and technology is beyond doubt and beyond dispute, the exact source of that prestige and the reasons for its emergence are more open to question. What exactly is it about modern science and technology that commands esteem? What was the *character of the achievement* involved in the transition from a pre-modern to a modern scientific outlook? The obvious answer is that science and technology enabled human beings to take better control of their environment, to transform their environment in a way that made it better suited for the realization of human purposes. The more scientific understanding developed, the more effectively human beings were able to interact with nature and get the things they wanted from it. The heightened prestige of the sciences would then be explained by the heightened power over nature the sciences made possible, an increase in power indicative of cognitive gains. The primary achievement in the transition to the modern scientific outlook, understood this way, is cognitive/technical (Habermas, 1984).

This is the way that scientific naturalists themselves tend to answer the question of the source of the prestige of modern science. Liberal naturalists of a pragmatist persuasion (such as Rorty and Habermas) share that tendency. The answer is congenial to champions of both

those standpoints because it does not invoke any suspicious supernatural entities: the purposes *served* by science are continuous with those *revealed* by science. In the case of SN (but not LN), that continuity is further explicated in terms of the *reducibility* of the former to the latter. The prestige of science is thus itself part of the natural order as described by science. Now Taylor has no argument with the view that science does vastly increase the ‘recipes for action’ available for humans in their dealings with their environment (Taylor 1985b). For him, it does indeed represent a gain in the cognitive/technical dimension. What he takes issue with is the view that this suffices to explain the prestige of science. For Taylor, the prestige of science and technology is more fundamentally a matter of the *admiration* in which it is held, which is to say the achievement of *spirit* it represents. To use Taylor’s terminology, the emergence, rise and eventual triumph of post-Galilean science and modern technology is part of a broader cultural transition, one marked by a change in ‘strong evaluations’ and ‘orientation to the good’.

The story of this change is recounted in the central chapters of *Sources of the Self*. The main message is that the adoption of a disengaged stance towards the world, the stance required for arriving at successful scientific explanations (those of the post-Galilean sort) was in the first instance a matter of moral/religious reform, a means of getting things right in a moral or spiritual sense. The scientific outlook later championed by the Enlightenment, Taylor shows, had its roots in this moral/religious reform, and progressed in stages through various forms of rationalized Christianity and Deism. At the time of its emergence, scientific naturalism - or what Taylor calls ‘Enlightenment naturalism’ - was seen as a step in the *moral* evolution of the species, not just as a method for getting more things done, being more technically proficient, or meeting morally neutral human ends. The ‘instrumentalization’ and ‘disenchantment’ of the world, which the scientific stance epitomised, was not just useful for realizing purposes human beings shared with other natural beings, ‘natural’ purposes such as

a need for food and prevention of disease. It also realized a *higher* purpose, a capacity of self-control and self-responsibility, that distinguished humans from other parts of nature, but which hitherto lay dormant or inadequately developed. By developing this capacity human beings stood to realize more fully their dignity as self-responsible agents. Furthermore, the capacities unleashed through science and technology could be utilized to ameliorate the condition of humankind generally, by eliminating hunger, disease, and so on. Indeed, it was a duty, well-ensconced in the Protestant ethic, for each human being to do what they could through hard work and self-discipline to promote that end. In this way, the scientific outlook and technological prowess get interwoven in what Taylor calls the modern 'identity', that is, the orientation to the good that came to dominate the culture of modernity, and it is above all owing to this that science and technology have prestige in that culture.

If Taylor is right, then SN, the sort of naturalism LN seeks to correct, is ultimately driven by a historically contingent conception of what it is to be a fully human agent. The genealogical critique serves as a reminder of this. We need to be reminded of it because SN lacks 'articulacy' about its own motivation. It presents itself as driven by purely epistemological and metaphysical considerations, by a conception of knowledge and reality modelled exclusively on the modern natural sciences. Within this model, the concepts of strong value, distinctions of worth (for example between the admirable and the contemptible), an orientation to the good, and so forth have no application. But these are the concepts we need to understand the underlying appeal of SN, concepts that flesh out what it means to be a fully human agent. In order to grasp the appeal of SN, we thus need to abandon the standpoint of SN. We should adopt instead a standpoint from which the central features of human agency appear for what they are. And from that standpoint, SN will appear as one interpretation amongst others of what it means to be a full human agent, one with a history and various paths of development.

Philosophical Anthropology

The task of bringing the central, historically enduring features of human agency clearly into view falls to what Taylor calls ‘philosophical anthropology’. Liberal naturalists have used the term ‘anthropology’ in a variety of ways, but in Taylor’s usage philosophical anthropology refers to reflection on the constitutive features of human reality in its full scope. The constitutive features of human reality are the features that make human reality the kind of reality it is. Possession of a soul, a mind, self-consciousness and free-will have been proposed as such human-making features. But, not unlike many scientific naturalists, Taylor rejects such ‘ontic’, substance-like proposals. Instead, he follows the hermeneutic tradition in taking human reality to be what it is on account of the full range of capacities human beings have to make *sense* of the world. Human reality is the reality of beings who confront ‘inescapable questions’ about the meaning of that reality. This gives rise to a conception of the human that is at odds with SN, but what about LN?

First, let’s consider human perceptual capacities. Taylor’s view, drawn from Merleau-Ponty, is that perception is fundamentally a capacity for orientation within an environment containing items with various degrees of significance. In this respect, human perceptual capacities resemble the perceptual capacities of other animals. Like other animals, humans must respond appropriately to the opportunities and obstacles provided by the surrounding world. They must *cope* with the world they find themselves in and the exercise of perceptual capacities is crucial to this. The world first appears as a perceptual *field*, with a foreground and a background, a ‘within reach’ and an ‘out of reach’, invitations to explore and warnings of danger, things to be equipped with and things ‘in the way’, etc. It is by coping with an environment as it is disclosed in a perceptual field that humans first acquire knowledge. But

this knowledge is not merely their *representation* of reality; it *is* their reality insofar as they have to cope with it. Furthermore, in Taylor's view, human knowledge and human reality never fully loses its character as embodied coping.

Why is this view at odds with SN? First, because it undermines the key epistemological claim of SN, that the scientific method is the one true source of knowledge. Perception qua embodied coping informs us about the world, it yields knowledge, and indeed stands in the background of all subsequent objective, scientific enquiry. That it provides such a background undermines another of SN's epistemological claims, namely that scientific knowledge is self-sufficient. If objective knowledge of the kind science provides makes sense only against a background of pre-objective perceptual understanding, the realm of science must be limited, finite, and dependent on something else. But because perception qua embodied coping is not so much a way of representing a world as a way of inhabiting one, because human reality becomes what it is through immersion in a field of significances, the view also undermines a central ontological claim of SN, namely that reality is exhausted by the posits of successful scientific explanations. Note that none of these reasons involves recourse to supernatural entities, superstitious beliefs, or violations of scientific principles. On the face of it, then, this aspect of Taylor's philosophical anthropology is compatible with LN. But it is only compatible with those versions of LN that do not respond to SN by 1) positing some special ontic feature such as mind, free-will or self-consciousness; 2) assimilating the pre-objective world inhabited by embodied agents to the object-world as it appears either to science *or* reflective common sense; 3) restricting the world-disclosive function of perception to the exercise of *conceptual* capacities on the part of the perceiver; or 4) denying a world-disclosive function to perceptual experience at all.

If human beings first come to grips with reality through perception and embodied coping, if they first come to know and inhabit reality in this way, they also have a range of

other capacities at their disposal for extending this knowledge and deepening their responsiveness to the demands reality makes on them. In particular, human beings have linguistic capacities which, when exercised in their full range, distinguish human beings from other animals. Taylor does not deny the existence of linguistic capacities in some non-human animals; indeed, for Taylor the continuity between the linguistic powers of non-human and human animals is a crucial fact about them and something that any plausible philosophy of language must account for. It is undeniable that many species have developed powers for intra-species communication as a mechanism for survival, and it may also be true that some species have evolved powers to communicate for its own sake, or for ends not directly related to the perpetuation of the species. But the ends served by the exercise of linguistic capacities in the human case, while including the exigencies of survival, are far more extensive. That SN draws the limits of these powers in the wrong place, and explains them in the wrong way, is a point of agreement between Taylor and LN. But Taylor has a different view to many liberal naturalists about the right way to understand them.

One major point of difference has to do with the role of truth-conditional theories of meaning. The idea that meaning is essentially a property of sentences, tied essentially to the conditions under which sentences are true (facts that are grasped when the sentence is understood), is central to the approach to language taken by some of the most prominent advocates of LN (such as Rorty and McDowell). The approach is congenial to liberal naturalists because it respects the autonomy of the ‘semantic’ – the irreducibility of meanings to natural causes, of logic to natural psychological processes – without positing a realm of meaning-contents independent of nature. It thereby offers an alternative both to SN and supernaturalism. But in Taylor’s view it remains encumbered by problematic assumptions that can be shared by SN and supernaturalism alike. Central amongst these is the idea that linguistic meaning is fundamentally a matter of ‘designation’ (Taylor 1985a, 2016). In their

earlier iterations, theories of meaning based on this assumption took the vehicle of designation to be the word (the word that names) and the object of designation to be separately existing objects, items like tables and trees. The fundamental linguistic capacity was thus thought to be the power to describe a non-linguistic, independently existing reality. Although truth-theoretic semantics takes a different view of the vehicle and object of designation, it remains committed, Taylor argues, to the primacy of the designative function. That the primary designating vehicle is the sentence rather than the word, and the primary designated item is the fact rather than the object, does not fundamentally alter the structure of the theory. It does not mark a fundamental departure from earlier theories that took the primary linguistic capacity to be that of designation.

What's wrong with such theories? Two things, in Taylor's view. First, they define the human linguistic capacity too narrowly, so that the full shape of this capacity becomes distorted. They screen out the diversity of language forms, such as body language, what Taylor calls the 'footings' by which human relations are established and maintained, ritual, music, narrative, metaphor, and generally what he calls non-assertoric 'portrayals' (Taylor 2016). These are just as much instances of the linguistic capacity at work as are the making of assertions, the utterance of grammatically well-formed sentences, the formulation of literal truths, the construction of scientific theories, and so forth. Second, the capacity the designative theories do focus on and identify as first in the order of explanation concerning meaning is a 'late arrival' that presupposes the development of more basic meaning-making powers. The capacity to name an object correctly and to describe a fact accurately, which undoubtedly human beings possess and exercise when uttering common-sense truths as well as formulating successful scientific theories, realizes a potential inherent in a more basic capacity for linguistic *disclosure*. The exercise of this capacity is simultaneously a 'bringing about' and an 'opening to', the production of something meaningful as well as a response to

something meaningful. For example, it is only once a feeling is linguistically expressed in a certain way, say through a dance or a piece of music or a poem, that its full meaning becomes manifest. The expression shapes the feeling but is also responsive to it. And for Taylor this isn't just true of internal states. The meaning of the order in which human beings are set, the larger reality they are a part of, also has this character. It has a meaning that can be disclosed, accessed and understood only through productive acts of linguistic expression. Such disclosure is not the business of the 'fact-establishing' discourses of science and common sense. Rather, as the founding figures of the Romantic movement were the first fully to appreciate, it is the calling of poetry.

Moral sources and supernaturalism

Taylor takes seriously the thought that success in the formulation of a poem, the composition of a piece of music, or the production of a work of art, can be just as much a matter of articulating a truth, or responding appropriately to reality, as success in the construction of a scientific theory can be. A successful work of art, on this view, is a work of understanding, a bringing into view of something that would otherwise remain hidden. The Romantic poets are a key reference point for Taylor because they showed how the productive imagination can be mobilised to bring into view something that remains hidden or obscured in the world as represented by the modern natural sciences. What goes missing in the world as represented by modern natural science, so the Romantics thought, is nature revealing itself as a 'moral source'. A moral source is Taylor's term for a reality contact with which, or reflection on which, *moves* us, and in moving us helps us to realize some higher, more fully human end. We get a pre-reflective apprehension of nature as a moral source when we feel elevated at the sight of a beautiful landscape, fulfilment in an experience of wilderness, and the like. To have

a sense of wholeness through a connection with nature of this sort is to have a sense of nature as a constitutive good, contact with which, or connection with which, brings about a good in me (my sense of wholeness). In such moments, a certain empowering attunement with nature seems to be manifest. Can that sense of empowering attunement and connection with something beyond me withstand reflection? It can, the Romantics thought, but only through portrayals of nature that resonate within the individual and resist the neutralizing, reifying tendencies of reflection.

The Romantics were not the only ones to think that art provided a locus for the manifestation of moral sources. And it is not only nature that has been thought to be disclosed as a moral source in art: God and human powers of self-responsibility and creative imagination have also featured as ‘frontiers of exploration’ (Taylor 1989). In Taylor’s view, the exploration in art of God, nature and human powers as moral sources is no less valid a form of enquiry than the exploration of nature through scientific observation and theorising. Of course, the results of these searches for understanding do not have the same kind of validity. A successful portrayal of nature as a moral source in a work of art, for example, does not establish a fact; it does not possess or aspire to objective validity. But neither is it just subjective fancy. It is answerable to *something*: nature insofar as it is able to move us and constitute a higher or fuller mode of life.

Does this view of the powers of linguistic disclosure, powers that stretch to the manifestation of moral sources, entangle Taylor in supernaturalism, and hence mark a departure from LN? I think it does – certainly it’s a view that liberal naturalists such as Rorty and Habermas cannot endorse (Rorty 1998, Habermas 1993). But it also poses a challenge to LN, for the following reason. We saw that LN makes a point of granting art and art criticism a place in its ontology and epistemology. The motivation behind this move is to retrieve a sense of the proper significance of art from subjectivistic and trivialising construals of the

‘aesthetic’ that typically accompany SN. Taylor’s understanding of art as a locus of moral sources shares that motivation. But in the LN version, the powers of art are constrained from the outside by an ex ante exclusion of the supernatural. There is no place for the supernatural or for mystery – this is what makes it a form of naturalism. But if, by imposing this constraint, LN nullifies our sense of the mysteriousness of the world as disclosed by art, and indeed of the world as it may be pre-reflectively experienced, then it is at risk of reproducing the very subjectivistic interpretation of art that motivates its repudiation of SN in the first place. It may be that in order for LN to carry through on its commitment to the ontological purport of art it may have to drop or modify its commitment to antisupernaturalism.

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