Reading Charles Taylor

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Although I was initially granted a fellowship to study the relationship between freedom and individualism, I instead chose to spend my summer investigating the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Professor Taylor is one of the most famous living philosophers, and although he primarily taught political philosophy during his career, he also has interests and publications in the areas of moral philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of action, hermeneutics, sociology, theology, and intellectual history. More than any other living philosopher, he has tried to break down the stifling boundaries of modern academic (and analytic) philosophy so as to bring into modern philosophy resources from other disciplines and cultures. For this, and for other reasons, I find him to be one of the best thinkers for actually understanding the world we live in, and the reasons we have arrived here.

I began the summer by reading two volumes of his collected early essays. Among these essays, the theme I found most interesting is that of Charles Taylor as a communitarian. Using Taylor's own definition as I understand it to be developed across several of his essays, a communitarian is someone who places the community and its needs above, or at least prior to, the individual. The communitarian will also have a more substantive idea of the common good towards which the political community ought to be oriented. This communitarian thinking is, in most philosophers' minds, opposed to that of the reigning western regime of liberalism, which is characterized by putting the right above the good—in other words, by having no substantive view of the common good—and by placing the individual above, and prior to, the community, primarily through the primacy of rights. Taylor, however, is fascinating in this conversation, because, having starting his career as a scholar of G.W.F. Hegel, he, like Hegel, believes in the dialectic—the process of resolving two contradicting points into a sensible, synthetic whole—and he thus calls himself a liberal communitarian; that is, he sees himself as a loyal critic of liberalism, and seeks to reject the more totalitarian conclusions which may result from a more muscular version of communitarianism. I find Taylor's work here to be fascinating because I essentially place myself where Taylor does as well—I am a critic of liberalism because I see it as acidic to the practice of common life—and yet I am unwilling to fully explore regimes which are fully anti-liberal.

Upon completing the two volumes of early essays, I turned to the two large works of Taylor's later period—*Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age.* In *Sources of the Self*, I was most taken with Taylor's idea that modern moral philosophy forgets entirely moral sources. What Taylor means here is that moral philosophy today is obsessed with minutely reasoning through every possible way in which we ought to act given every possible scenario, and yet it has no interest whatsoever in investigating what might power that moral action—be it the transformative power of God's love, *agape,* or ideas of natural harmony or the achievement of honor through the austere practice of disengaged reason. Finally, in *A Secular Age*, which features Taylor at his most Catholic, I found most compelling the idea that we cannot understand modern secularism as merely the result of science disproving God, but instead must look to the success of secularism as stemming from various reform impulses within the Christian tradition, and from the ways in which the changing social theories of the modern era have made atheism look not necessarily more reasonable, but rather more honorable, more manly. In this work, Taylor vigorously wants to argue that while faith in God can never again be certain, it will always remain an open option to many among us, and as Taylor sees it, it is still the *most* sensible way of understanding the world, and the nature of the human experience.

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