

Charles Taylor and dramatic narrative: Argument and genre

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Alasdair MacIntyre***University of Notre Dame, USA*

If Charles Taylor had died when he was 55, after the publication of his *Philosophical Papers* in 1985, he would have been remembered as both a notable historian of philosophy and a major contributor to some central philosophical debates. His two books on Hegel had secured his reputation as an historian. His critiques of those projects in psychology and political science where it had been taken for granted that the methods of the natural sciences could be extended unproblematically to the social sciences together with his perceptive appropriation of insights drawn from phenomenology and hermeneutics had opened up new perspectives in the philosophy of mind and action. But with the publication of those two extraordinary narratives, *Sources of the Self* in 1989, and *A Secular Age* 18 years later, reckoning with Taylor's work became something else.¹

Both books are histories, but quite unlike standard histories of philosophy, indeed standard histories of any previous kind. Both advance philosophical theses and arguments, but theses and arguments that are put to very different uses from those characteristic of philosophical writing. The change is a change both in genre and in the relationship of author to readers. For Taylor's theses and arguments find their place in a story which claims to be no less than that of our shared culture, a story of the transformations in how we have come to understand ourselves. In *Sources of the Self* the development of peculiarly modern conceptions – of subjectivity, of reason as requiring disengagement from world and body and, in consequence, an instrumental stance, of the significance of the transactions of everyday life, of the sentiments, and of art understood as the natural expression of feeling – is narrated so that each is seen as contributing to a larger change in the ways in which our lives have or fail to have meaning and fulfillment. What leads us to value various goods in our lives as we do is, on Taylor's account, their relationship to some higher constitutive good, a good understood in cultures that

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preceded modernity as transcendent, as a reality independent of ourselves the love of which motivates us, Plato's Form of the Good, say, or, for Jews and Christians, God. But the progress of modernity has been such that we are now largely, although not entirely, unable to understand the constitutive good in this way. So the question arises as to whether we are able to sustain allegiance to those standards which modernity has taught us to value. Modernity is perhaps tragically self subverting. Or perhaps not? The story ends with unresolved questions.

So it is too with the story narrated in *A Secular Age*, one complementary to that of *Sources of the Self*. The key notion that Taylor now invokes is that of a sense of fullness, a sense of, at moments an anticipation of, what it would be to have our lives completed and fulfilled. One consequence of the long history from those past cultures in which belief in God was unproblematic to that modern condition in which such belief is inescapably problematic is that for both contemporary unbelievers and contemporary believers that sense of fullness has been too often diminished. The interest of this strong claim lies of course in the detail of Taylor's account, in which many of the episodes recounted in *Sources of the Self* are revisited, but now with new concerns. And the outcome of the conflicts between secular humanists and religious believers turns out to be a set of dilemmas, of choices, where both parties are all too liable to go astray, so putting our sense of fullness in dangerous question.

Two features of these dramatic narrative are distinctive. One is the author's use of first person pronouns, both plural and singular. Both readers and author are themselves characters in the stories. So Taylor says at the outset: "*I* want to explore the background picture of *our* spiritual nature and predicament"² and on the concluding pages of both narratives he addresses readers who he expects to dissent in various ways. As of course they have. But a second distinctive feature is the contrast between Taylor's stance and the responses that he elicits from most at least of his numerous critics. For they fasten on this or that particular argument or this or that particular historical claim and quarrel with it in an academic and impersonal way, as though nothing very much is at stake for them. Taylor's characteristic response has been to evaluate the objection, perhaps to revise his philosophical, or historical, claim in the light of it, and to conclude that, when due weight has been given to it, the credibility of the story that he is telling has not been damaged. What such critics have failed to recognize is that the only adequate critical and dissenting response to Taylor would be to construct or at least to gesture towards the construction of an alternative and rival narrative, one that accounted for all that Taylor accounts for and more, one that in addition explains why Taylor's narrative advances a defective account of modernity and of secularization.

So Taylor has provided a new interdisciplinary agenda, in itself a rare achievement. But this is not all. For we now cannot avoid recognizing that much piecemeal work in philosophy, in history, and in the human sciences either contributes to or presupposes (or both) some background narrative of the same order as that presented by Taylor, something of which the practitioners of those disciplines have been too often unaware. To have enabled this recognition may have been Taylor's greatest achievement.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
2. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3 (my italics).