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Charles Taylor and the Possibility of Individualism about Identity

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Summary

Even though the concept of personal identity enjoys great popularity in normative debates about the public standing of culture, nationalism, and civic equality, the concept itself remains very unclear. In various disciplines, including sociology, social psychology, and psychoanalysis, that concept has different meanings, which stands in the way of its unambiguous use in political theory debates. An important obstacle to the clearer delineation of the concept of identity is methodological, and concerns the disagreement over the correct approach to studying identity. One of the most influential participants in this debate is Charles Taylor, who argues that identity cannot be defined as a property of individuals, but only as a property of social groups. If plausible, this view undermines all variants of the liberal approach to identity, which all maintain that the worth of identity must be understood in relation to the rights and interests of individuals. This paper examines the plausibility of Taylor's argument, and defends the possibility of individualism about identity.

Keywords: Charles Taylor, culture, individualism, personal identity, value, holism

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with investigating the possibilities for an individualist conception of practical identity – that is, a conception that accounts for practical identities in terms of some properties of individual human persons. While the individualist perspective on identity is widely accepted in some social scientific disciplines, such as psychology and psychoanalysis, it is contested in others, such as sociology and social psychology. Even less agreement on the proper viewpoint on identities is found in normative political theory, which is the angle from which I am approaching the concept of identity. Although that concept is frequently and confi-

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dently invoked in a variety of normative debates – for example, regarding national self-determination, special rights for cultural minorities, patriotism, and so on – it remains undertheorized and unclear. David Copp complains that the notion of identity “has not been given an adequate philosophical explication”, and suggests that it may comprise “a family of ideas that have not been well distinguished from one another” (Copp, 2002: 365). Another author remarks that the concept of identity is “quite poorly circumscribed. Nothing in the nature of things dictates a particular usage and no convention has been elaborated to constrain its application (Weinstock, 2006: 15).”

Uncertainty over the status and viability of the individualist orientation in the study of identity has been an important source of this confusion. In recent debates, this uncertainty has been prompted particularly by the communitarian critique of the liberal view of the self.¹ Theorists such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Brian Barry have been accused of appealing to a distortingly asocial view of selfhood. To remedy this defect, communitarian critics have advocated a more expansive understanding of personhood, which includes the various social conditions for individuals’ practical deliberation. Charles Taylor’s contribution to this debate has been particularly subtle and well-elaborated. He has argued that identity is a matter of dialogical self-interpretation, the locus of which is the society as a whole rather than any individuals that compose it. There is, on his view, something intrinsically “undecomposable” about lived communal practice, which exists above and beyond any attempt to compartmentalize it. Whittling the worth of identity to a set of propositions about individuals is therefore flawed from the start. A practical implication of this Taylor’s view is that there can be no talk of partial cultural accommodation of identities, only full-house autonomy for the community that shapes and nurtures identities. In this paper I will present and evaluate Taylor’s critique of individualism about identity, focusing on his thesis of “irreducibly social goods”.

2. The dynamic concept of the self

Taylor defines identity as follows:

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what is or ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (Taylor, 1989: 27)

¹ The clearest expressions of communitarian political philosophy are found in: Sandel (1996) and MacIntyre (1981). Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor are also often labelled as communitarians, although their criticisms of liberalism are less ontologically oriented. I discuss this claim in relation to Taylor in the first half of the paper.

This instructive passage is extremely compressed, weaving together several distinct and complex argumentative strands. Nonetheless, it can be summarized as follows. Its central theme is opposition to the analytical separation of the subject's identity from his actions and commitments as a member of a particular social world. Concepts, including ethical concepts, are based on prior engagement with the world, where this engagement is not random or arbitrary but guided by the horizon of shared understandings. The distinctive feature of this constitutive horizon, in turn, is its groundedness in the community's conception of what constitutes a good or fully-realized life. Since the conception is itself the product of a dynamic process, an expression of the community's unique way of life and deliberative practices, the subject's selfhood is also best conceived not as fixed but a matter of dialogical self-interpretation. Underpinning the self-interpretive project is an essentially communal understanding of the good.

As it may perhaps be gathered from this brief sketch, Taylor's philosophical treatment of identity incorporates two mutually reinforcing insights: one is the dynamic Hegelian notion of the emerging self; the other is the more Aristotelian idea that self-interpretation can only be conducted in view of the good. In conjunction, the two notions work against two constituents of what Taylor terms the malaise of "atomism". The dynamic notion of the self is directed against that part of the atomistic outlook which Taylor calls "ontological individualism", the view according to which one "can and ought to account for social actions, structures, and conditions in terms of properties of the constituent individuals" (Taylor, 1995: 181). The contested view here is that societies must be understood and arranged from the perspective of individual human persons. However this claim is easily misunderstood. In particular, it may be thought that Taylor wishes to advocate an alternative picture of personhood – for example, one in which collectivities can also be moral persons. But Taylor is not a collectivist.² In fact, his objection to ontological individualism is not at all directed at the sort of entities that it picks out as subjects. Rather, his criticism targets its analytical method, which draws its roots from Descartes – and specifically its freezing of the social categories. The analytical approach in philosophy breaks down the object of its scrutiny into progressively smaller constitutive parts with the objective of observing their individual contributions to the working of the whole. In the study of society, this method manifests itself in the reduction of the lived practice of the society to the series of relations between distinct individual agents. An inevitable part of this reduction, argues Taylor, is the conceptual separation of individuals from each other and from the practices in which they are

² Collectivism about personhood is not a commonly held view nowadays. A rare recent proponent of it is Vernon Van Dyke, for example in: Van Dyke (1982; 1977; 1980).

involved. Without this separation, the project of observing the way in which these disparate agents interact would be impossible.

However, Taylor claims, this strict division of the societal whole into neatly individuated agents is contrived and incoherent. In looking for neat and manageable categories it compromises fidelity to reality. This is evident in two explanatory failures of the analytic concept of the individuated self: its failure in accounting for the nature of the self, and in expressing why selfhood is valuable. On the first note, that approach supposedly cannot explain how we relate to ourselves. This argument starts from the idea, which echoes Hegel's criticism of Kant's theoretical philosophy, that "our representations of things – the kinds of objects we pick out as whole, enduring entities – are grounded in the way we deal with those things" (Taylor, 1995b: 11). The analytical approach runs counter to this idea by assuming that individuals can be regarded in abstraction from their engagement with the social world. What drops out of consideration within this perspective is that persons necessarily regard themselves under certain descriptions. In other words, they always think of themselves as such-and-such persons: as honest, witty, sporty, conniving, intellectual, Danish and so on. In identifying themselves in this way they cannot but use concepts borrowed from their culture, which is why the self is always coloured by communal ideas and ideals. Secondly, reduction also fails to acknowledge that one values and takes pride in oneself precisely because of the traits and dispositions captured in this comprehensive self-conception – not because one is an abstract moral unit, but because one is a human being of a certain sort: for example, a caring mother, or a good socialist. For Taylor, these deficiencies of the analytical account of selfhood warrant embracing an alternative, dynamic concept of the self. It is a concept in which, rather than a finished article, the self is a continuous project: the project of becoming a person of a determinate sort through ongoing interaction with others. Essential to this project is the process of receiving and granting recognition – that is, assurance of selfhood. Recognition is a dialectical notion, which means that affirming the selfhood of another person (as "the mother", "the socialist", or whatever) at the same time establishes one's own subjectivity.³

³ This view of the self is developed most extensively in: Hegel (1977). However, the idea that connects recognition and unimpaired selfhood has earlier roots. Arguably, aspects of it can be found in Rousseau's sentimental romanticism about self-expression. On a radical interpretation, Rousseau can even be seen as a direct predecessor of Hegel's dynamic concept of the self. Guignon thus notes: "For the more authentic form of self-revelation Rousseau envisions, what the self-portrait presents is not a faithful copy of the subject but a representation of the subject's ongoing search for the truth of the self. The image is authentic because *the self just is this search*" (Guignon, 2004: 69; original emphasis).

According to this Hegelian argument, individuals' quest for authenticity must not only be publicly tolerated; it must also be publicly recognised as worthwhile. Without recognition the quest is futile, for the individual's objective of asserting that he is somebody, somebody worthy of respect, is baldly and easily defeated when the enormous strength of common opinion is harnessed into convincing him that he is an insignificant speck. Or, for that matter, when his plea is plainly ignored. This worry is adopted and taken extremely seriously by contemporary identity-theorists, to the degree that Nancy Fraser is justified in saying that "the usual approach to the politics of recognition – what I shall call the 'identity model' – starts from the Hegelian idea that identity is constructed dialogically, through a process of mutual recognition" (Fraser, 200: 109).⁴ This demand for recognition is thus the demand for an appropriate societal attitude towards individuals' striving for authenticity, where it encompasses both a negative aspect – that one's quest be tolerated, meaning that he is not held in contempt or abused because of his pronouncements of identity; and usually also a positive aspect – that the value of the quest is given proper public acknowledgement (or that diversity is cherished, as the slogan goes).

3. Self-interpretation and irreducibly social goods

A further and distinctive part of Taylor's position is the special importance he gives to self-interpretation in the context of recognition (cf. Taylor, 1989: 46-47). It is at this point that the Hegelian strand of Taylor's argument is joined by the Aristotelian insistence on the communal nature of evaluative standards. This insistence can be seen as Taylor's rebuttal of the other aspect of the atomistic doctrine: what may be termed "justificatory (or value-) individualism". Whereas ontological individualism is an approach to the study of persons, justificatory individualism is an approach to the study of goods. Its central claim is that the property of goodness can be examined in relation to individuals alone. Against this claim, Taylor argues that the goodness of some goods – for instance language, and civic virtue – cannot be explained with reference to lone individual agents. This is the position of justificatory (or value-) *holism*. Taylor's idea can be approached by returning to the thought that in addition to recognizing ourselves as such-and-such persons, we also take an evaluative stance towards our being the way that we are. One does not only care to know that the road she is following in her endeavours is one of a mother, or socialist; one also wants to know where she is standing in this course and how well she is doing in her strivings. In fact, one *must* ask oneself these strong evaluative questions, as Taylor calls them, because there is no way of attaching these labels to oneself with-

⁴ For arguments that draw, to a lesser or greater extent, on this Hegelian idea see Honneth (1995), Honneth and Margalit (2001) and Margalit (1996).

out appealing to public standards of goodness. Asking about the good comes before saying anything about oneself, as its transcendental condition.

In explaining the inevitability of strong evaluative frameworks Taylor often invokes the spatial metaphor: when a lost traveller asks where is Mont Tremblant, it will not do for the native of the region to blindfold him and drop him off at the foot of the mountain the next day. The traveller will, to be sure, have found the spot and in one sense his curiosity has been satisfied; but, in another and more important respect, he is as lost as he was before. For, he has no concept of the geographical area and, despite his being brought to the destination, no understanding of where he is in relation to where he was before, or to other places in the known world (Taylor, 1989: 41-42). But this is not the position one finds oneself in when trying to work out his identity. Self-interpretation is an own effort, consisting in placing oneself in some role or under some description *for oneself* – which means that one cannot rely on the benevolent native for guidance but is compelled to go by his own well-informed understanding of the map. The framework that fixates the ethical terrain and make finding one's way possible, continues Taylor, is the shared understanding of what is a good, or worthwhile, way of being.⁵

However, Taylor's communitarian understanding of goods goes further than the claim that any self-interpretation must make use of cultural categories and ideals. This claim is not very controversial or uncommon. In fact one of the major liberal currents, the Millian version of liberalism, explicitly acknowledges the deep entanglement of individuals' choices and the cultural context. One of central points of Appiah's approach to identity is that the development of individuality requires "the complex interdependence of self-creation and sociability" (Appiah, 2005: 17). And Joseph Raz maintains that aside from independence and appropriate mental abilities, there is also a social condition of individuals' autonomy: an adequate range of options (Raz, 1986: 372-373). Autonomous choosing is choosing between valuable options. What differentiates Taylor from these socially sensitive liberals is that he regards some goods as unanalyzable to the interests, or well-being of individual agents. For Appiah and Raz the social context provides indispensable resources for the development of individuals' character and their exercise of autonomy, respectively. Taylor goes beyond these claims by postulating a class of goods that are only

⁵ Cf.: "In the light of our understanding of identity, the portrait of an agent free from all frameworks rather spells for us a person in the grip of an appalling identity crisis. Such a person wouldn't know where he stood on issues of fundamental importance, would have no orientation in these issues whatever, wouldn't be able to answer for himself on them. If one wants to add to the portrait by saying that the person doesn't suffer this absence of frameworks as a lack, isn't in other words in a crisis at all, then one rather has a picture of frightening dissociation. In practice, we should see such a person as deeply disturbed" (*Ibid.*, p. 31).

meaningful in relation to a community that is composed of, but cannot be reduced to, individuals.

Taylor's irreducibility thesis should be clearly distinguished from the benign claim about *public goods* which present-day liberalism can easily wrestle with. One cannot enjoy fresh air without the same good being had by others. On the modern understanding of the state, where it is not seen as a decentralized cluster of corporations with private armies, there can be no system of national defence that benefits only some citizens and not all. Provision of the good of national security requires the pooling of considerable financial resources, which can in itself stimulate public debate on current norms of political inclusion and state's duties; it may be associated with intense feelings of pride and obligation to the national community; and in some extreme cases it engages individuals in undertaking sacrifices that would seem to outweigh the expected benefits, especially when their lives are endangered. But none of this affects the fact that national defence, like fresh air, is open to a reduction. In the final analysis, they are both goods for *lone individuals*, so that "the good is a good only because it benefits individuals" (Taylor, 1995a: 129). Each is intrinsically "decomposable", meaning that in order to gain insight into how and why they carry value it is sufficient to look into the separate satisfactions that compose them.

Public goods thus point to intersubjectivity only in the weak, non-constitutive sense. However, in addition, Taylor argues for another category of goods: those by their nature unsusceptible to any reduction. He points out that thinking of culture and language, in particular, as decomposable takes something away from their goodness: how individuals relate to their culture slips out of sight on an analytical account. So, one part of this objection to the atomist theory of the good is that the individuals' relationship towards their culture is best conceived as holistic. The actions we find ourselves performing and the social roles we find ourselves occupying are the actions and roles that are prescribed and delineated by the totality of social interchange. Describing certain behaviours as morally praiseworthy and others as reprehensible, working out and conceptualizing the ingredients of the good life, coming to the awareness of our unique traits and capacities – all these activities we inevitably conduct in the language of our cultural community. We are thoroughly implicated in the practices and shared understandings of our culture.

But this is not all that Taylor is saying. His claim is not only that culture is an irreducible feature of the society; it is that culture is an irreducible feature of the society *and* that it is a good (Taylor, 1995a: 138). Moreover, culture is a good *because* it is an irreducible feature of the society. He states that culture must be valued because it provides the indispensable background and structure to human action, where his favourite way of making the point is by likening culture to language.

Adopting Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction, he speaks of the difference between *parole*, or speech act, and *langue*, or the totality of the linguistic system. It cannot be denied that language perpetuates and recreates itself through individual speech acts, as external manifestations of that language, but the important thing to note is that *langue* cannot be conceived as the lump sum of all acts of *parole*. The reason for this is that linguistic utterances cannot be created *ex nihilo*: they must themselves be modelled after the pre-existing structure of meaning provided by *langue*. Now, it might be thought that this claim's reference to individuals ultimately subverts the whole irreducibility thesis. However, the fact that a linguistic code is analyzable into disparate words, propositions and speech acts, and that each speech act is attachable to an individual speaker does not in itself speak against Taylor. It does nothing to undermine the existence of an irreducible backdrop which only gives *parole* meaning. Individual utterances are made possible by this abstract structure, which continues to hold even if language must necessarily be affirmed in concrete situations, by concrete people. The same dialogical relationship, argues Taylor, exists between culture and the individual. Hence, since culture is as fundamental to action as *langue* is to speech, we must value culture if we value agency.

With these claims in place, the depth of Taylor's disagreement with the analytical approach to identity can be more readily appreciated. Since he endorses the Hegelian idea of the emerging self, he regards recognition in the public domain as essential to the development of selfhood. This is a remarkably strong defence of the value of unhindered participation in the public life of a community. It is focused on a value that precedes and transcends the ideals and principles that liberal theorists usually invoke, such as liberty, or welfare, or human rights – the value of selfhood itself. However, Taylor does not regard selfhood in static terms, as something that can be had or lost once and for all. Rather, to be a person is to take part in the process of becoming a determinate kind of human being in dialogue with others. Furthermore, for Taylor this dialogical self-interpretation must be framed in terms, and draw on ideals, inherited from one's culture. What is distinctive about Taylor's position, however, is that self-interpretation must be conducted in view of a special class of goods, ones that cannot be reduced to a sum of goods for disparate individuals. Points of reference for individuals' self-identification are objects and virtues that are good for the community.

At the practical level, Taylor's claims about identity have the potential of representing one of the strongest cases conceivable for the autonomy of cultural groups. The core of such a strongly communitarian defence would be the startlingly forceful claim that nothing less than moral subjectivity is at stake in debates about identity. This is because the emergence of integral selfhood heavily depends on full and unobstructed participation in the community's cultural interchange. Furthermore,

the strong argument for cultural autonomy would deny that this can be achieved through partial accommodation of cultural claims, for the essential feature of a cultural community is that it expresses itself in its political constitution. It collectively probes and answers the question about the human good and then builds institutions around it, where the important thing is that it does the searching and the regulating *on its own*. In this regard, Taylor may be seen as recommending a return to some insights of the civic-humanistic tradition of political theorizing.⁶ This tradition, which among others includes ancient writers, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville, places great emphasis on the civic virtue of patriotism. It is a virtue which cannot be explained by appealing to the separate virtues of individuals because it is not a property of any of the parts of the polity but of the whole. It embodies a common spirit of devotion to the public good, stemming from the shared sense that participation in the political body forms part of the good citizen's dignity. Politics is, on this conception, not an instrument in the service of individual interests, but a fate that we are sharing, an enterprise that is truly *ours* and not mine, yours and the third person's. As with Taylor's irreducibly social goods, the meaning of patriotism remains elusive if one stubbornly persists with the idea of patriotic citizens where talking about common patriotic virtue is more appropriate.⁷

In sum, Taylor's arguments undermine individualist analyses of identity by making a case for the inclusion of reference to essentially communal goods in the concept of identity. Within this perspective, the central determinant of an individual's identity is not any decision or property of that individual, but the dialogical community of which he is part. As Taylor puts it, "To understand our predicament in terms of finding or losing orientation in moral space is to take the *space* which our frameworks seek to define as ontologically basic" (Taylor, 1989: 29; emphasis added).

⁶ The connection between Taylor's political views and the republican tradition is drawn especially in Taylor (1995).

⁷ Michael Sandel offers an account of the self that has similarly republican inclinations (Sandel, 1996: 79-103). After considering Nozick's objection to Rawls' difference principle, Sandel argues that Rawls is only able to treat natural talents as a common societal asset at the expense of violating his own principle of distinctness of persons. More specifically, what precludes Rawls from taking that route is that individuation of persons is taken as *a priori* given, and includes the assumption of mutual disinterest. Sandel's solution (in which he of course differs from Nozick) is to include such attributes as attachment to others in the definition of selfhood, as constitutive rather than merely accidental properties of the self. This Sandel's positive conception of intersubjectivity (for which he also finds support in Rawls' idea of the social union) is sometimes overlooked in favour of his more widely cited negative critique of the "unencumbered self". However, the republican disposition also carries over into his subsequent writings, with a more prominent role to play.

4. Human agency and culture

I have already noted that it is possible to understand Taylor's position on identity, and the critique of individualism that it involves, as an amalgam of two theses. One is the Hegelian thesis about the dynamic nature of selfhood; the other is the Aristotelian thesis about the orientation of practical reasoning towards the communal good. The notion that serves to connect these two disparate claims is that of self-interpretation. For Taylor, individuals constitute themselves through the process of self-interpretation, which stands in need of validation by others. Self-interpretation is in turn always evaluative: we do not merely describe ourselves as a certain kind of person, but ask whether we are doing well in being that kind of person. One wonders whether she is a good mother, a good communist, and so on. And in answering such questions one must appeal to an essentially communal notion of what constitutes a good life.

A full assessment of Taylor's critique of reductionism about identity would require an appraisal of both theses that compose it. I will however focus on only one of them, the Aristotelian claim about irreducibly social goods. This would be impossible if the two strands of his argument were inseparable, but this is not the case. One can be a Hegelian, of a more orthodox type than Taylor, about recognition without thinking that recognition is primarily a matter of self-interpretation. Equally, it is possible to espouse a more conventional Aristotelian position that affirms the orientation of practical reasoning towards communal good, but takes selfhood as fixed. The merger of these two lines of argument is a highly original and idiosyncratic feature of Taylor's philosophy. That said, it is still necessary to justify the decision to omit further consideration of the Hegelian element of Taylor's position. Given that the Hegelian line of argument advocates the ontology of fluid subjectivity, it is difficult to both present and assess in an entirely perspicuous fashion. Since it breaks down the conceptual separation of persons from their engagement with the world – the subject-object relation, as it is sometimes called – it cannot be done justice without abandoning the analytical style of philosophizing. Since liberal political theory is mostly, if not wholly, done in the analytical mode, it would need to be stretched considerably to properly confront the idea of the emerging self.⁸ Of course, this is no argument against doing so. However this meta-theoretical enquiry would not only require much more space than I can afford here, it would also dis-

⁸ The need of the analytical method for fixed units of analysis is expressed well in Kukathas's critique of Iris Marion Young's Hegelian account of the self: "If we are to theorize about the good for human beings (or about anything, for that matter), something must be kept constant. The suggestion in this work is that that constant is the individual, as the entity with whose good we must ultimately be concerned" (Kukathas, 2003: 90).

tract from my main topic of practical identity. Therefore, I cannot further discuss the first part of Taylor's critique.⁹

Instead, I wish to focus on the other part of Taylor's rebuttal of atomism about identity, his view of irreducibly social goods as the basis for evaluative self-interpretation. My suggestion is that this view should be rejected because the concept of irreducibly social goods is unacceptable. It is unacceptable because its treatment of the conditions of human agency is arbitrary and hence illegitimate. My objection is thus different from the criticism that irreducibly social goods are not really *irreducibly social*. An exponent of this latter charge is Chandran Kukathas. He argues that "the condition of human beings is, ultimately, one of solitariness; and the goods each knows he knows not in common with others but alone. The fact that human beings are social beings does nothing to alter this" (Kukathas, 2003: 67). What leads him to this conclusion is the difficulty in explaining the supposed intrinsicness of communal goods. The only way in which the goodness of culture and language can be understood, writes Kukathas, is if they are ultimately good for individuals. Since all goods are *consumed* individually rather than collectively, they can only be goods for individuals (Kukathas, 2003: 69).

It is doubtful whether Kukathas's critique succeeds. It is rooted in the uncontentious claim that "For something to be valuable it must, at some point, be valuable to *someone* for the value it gives *someone*" (Kukathas, 2003: 68; original emphasis). From that claim Kukathas moves on to a further claim: there cannot be intrinsically group goods because it is unclear how anything can be good for a group, as something that exists above its members. Ultimately, only individuals have interests and concerns in virtue of which something can be good for them. Since groups are composites of individuals, with no interests and concerns that are independent of the interests and concerns of their constituent members, all group goods are in fact

⁹ This restriction of my discussion should not be understood as an implicit concession to Taylor: it does not rule out the possibility that the idea of the emerging self is implausible after all. Hegel's idea rests on a critique of the formality of Kant's philosophy – specifically, of Kant's ambition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to uncover the necessary conditions of cognition itself, abstracted from any content of cognition. Hegel's charge is that this ambition, and the notion of a critique of *pure* reason, is incoherent. One cannot, he claims, investigate the necessary structure of cognition without a basis in some prior cognition. To claim otherwise is to make the mistake of "refusing to enter the water until you have learnt to swim" (Hegel, 1975: 66). Yet, this objection is not obviously well-placed. For instance, Karl Ameriks has claimed that Hegel wrongly assumes that Kant aims to deliver a general criterion for knowledge. Instead, Ameriks contends, Kant starts by assuming that there are some warranted knowledge-claims, and then looks to answer which a priori principles would be required by them (Ameriks, 1985). On this construal, the criticism that forms the basis of Hegel's dynamic concept of the self is misdirected. Although there is much to be said for this claim, I lack the space to do so here.

reducible to goods for group members. However this objection misses its target because, as I noted earlier, Taylor is not a collectivist. In his opposition to justificatory individualism he does not contest the claim that goods can only be for individuals. His claim, which he calls value holist, is that there are some goods whose value for individuals cannot be understood if these individuals are studied in isolation from others. Aside from things that are valuable for me *and* you, suggests Taylor, there are also things that are valuable for *us* (Taylor, 1995: 189). We are ontologically separate but can experience and enjoy certain goods only together, as a product of our cultural interchange.

Taylor's claims can be further explained by noting that he thinks of culture and language as background conditions of human agency. Their value consists in the fact that they are indispensable for making any kind of choices. His reasoning is that if agency is taken to be a good, then that which is its necessary prerequisite must also be considered valuable. It should be kept in mind, however, that Taylor's argument does not pick out culture and language as the *causes* of agency, but their *conditions*.¹⁰ So, Taylor is not committed to the claim that shared norms and understandings are to be valued because they bring human action to existence. If this straightforward relation of determination existed, culture would destroy rather than promote agency. Instead, Taylor maintains that the level to which culture meshes with individual choices allows one to think that action could not take place in the absence of these norms and understandings. Despite the lack of causal determination, it can be said that they carve out a niche in which being an agent presents itself as a possibility. Without them, thinking and acting would be inconceivable. The rationale then is clear and compelling for prizing culture as the enabling condition for engaging in any sort of activity.

However Taylor's defence of the value of culture as a background condition of human agency is, in the end, unpersuasive. It overlooks the fact that even if culture is a condition of human agency, it cannot be regarded as the *ultimate* condition of agency that is not itself conditioned. Taylor's decision to arrest the enquiry into the conditions of agency at the level of culture is arbitrary and philosophically unacceptable. To explain: throughout his discussion, Taylor assumes that the flip-side of rejecting justificatory individualism is accepting the status of culture as a good. The negative claim of value holism is its rejection of the study of all goods in relation to

¹⁰ He zeroes in on "the way in which thoughts presuppose and require a background of meanings to be the particular kind of thoughts they are. But the term "presuppose" and "require" in the previous sentence point to a peculiarly strong relation. It is not a contingently causal one, which we could imagine a way around – the kind we invoke when we say that neolithic villages couldn't have built pyramids because this requires and presupposes a larger labour force" (Taylor, 1995a: 131-132).

lone individuals. Its positive claim, Taylor suggests, is that culture is a good and as such matters in political life. It is this assumption that underlies his practical normative prescriptions – for example, his claim that a full appreciation of holism entails granting some form of autonomy to territorially demarcated and institutionalized cultural corpuses, such as Quebec. Only if cultural autonomy is granted to them, suggests Taylor, can the Quebecois be reunited with the cultural core that informs, and is in turn informed by, their moral reasoning. He writes: “Where the nature of the good requires that it be sought in common, this is the reason for its being a matter of public policy”, the policy in question being that of a distinct cultural community (Taylor, 1995c: 59).

But it is implausible to suppose that the rejection of justificatory individualism entails accepting the status of culture as a good. What discredits this supposition is the possibility that even if culture is the background condition of agency, it is itself conditioned. In other words, the possibility is that there are *pre-cultural*, or “brute”, facts and conditions that make the cultural interchange possible. If this is the case, rejecting justificatory individualism does not entail accepting the normative significance of culture. Instead, it warrants accepting the normative significance of brute facts, which are the more fundamental condition of human agency.

The objection I am advancing would be unavailable if the following argument succeeds: the fact that all our concepts are mediated by culture means that there can be no meaningful talk of anything outside cultural understandings. Culture accounts for all we know and can represent, which is why there are no *other things* beside culture that constrain our behaviour. However this argument is deeply problematic. In a passage representative of the view I wish to counter Bhikhu Parekh writes:

Even something as basic and inevitable as death is viewed and experienced differently in different cultures. In some it is a brute fact of life, like the falling of leaves or the diurnal setting of the sun, and arouses no strong emotions; in some others it is a release from the world of sorrow and embraced with joy; in yet others it is a symbol of human weakness, a constant reminder of inadequate human mastery over nature, and accepted with such varied emotions as regret, puzzle, incomprehension and bitterness. (Parekh, 2000: 121)

Parekh’s suggestion is that facts or events in the physical world, even those as drastic as death, do not affect us *in themselves*; what brings them to our attention and renders them an occasion for feelings of stoic acceptance, or joy, or puzzlement and anguish is the cultural interpretation. The claim contains an exaggeration: it is certainly true that our reception of physical facts is not immediate, but holding that they therefore do not impinge upon our concepts is simply far-fetched. They do because they constrain the scope of cultural understandings. In other words, they are what the interpretation is *about*. Thus, at the most general level, there could be

no concept of death as release from worldly suffering if there were not for the underscoring brute fact of biological termination of life. But moreover, it could also be argued that this specific way of dealing with death finds its grounds in certain objective features – of the event itself, which often comes after a period of painful physiological deterioration; or of human life, which presents most people with innumerable adversities and frustrations; perhaps also of the attestations of the dying, who sometimes express profound placidity in the face of imminent perishment. This is why we can, to some degree, understand how one can think of death as merciful release.¹¹

Now, there is no reason to deny that there may be great scope for interpretation in these matters. The underlying brute fact may be multifaceted (as most would seem) – that is, such that we might regard plausible construing it in a number of ways: as salvation, ultimate defeat, or an ordinary part of what it means to be human. But, again, there is something about death that accounts for these diverse imaginable attitudes. The crucial point then is that culture is not the terminus of conceptual explanation, and as such cannot be presented as the ultimate arena for holist interchange. Factors standing beyond it ensure that, as far as interpretations are concerned, not anything goes. Death cannot be thought of as “blue”, or “salty”, or “modest”, whether one is Amish, Burmese or Finnish. Seen in this light, the fact that the physical world only affects our concepts indirectly ceases to be as pivotal as Taylor and Parekh maintain. The important thing is that it does nonetheless.

The purpose of discussing beliefs and attitudes surrounding death has been to point out that they cannot be merely the product of what Taylor understands by culture – of the institutionalized corpus of norms and understandings that is distinct from other such corpuses and attaches to some community of people. These norms and understandings draw on an order of things that is external to them, and that constrains them. One can then say, to adopt Taylor’s terminology, that this external and pre-cultural order is a background condition of the cultural fabric, just as the latter is the background condition of human agency. If this is so, it makes sense to criticize Taylor on the account that it is not included in the Saussurian circle that his multicultural recommendations are meant to sustain. So, when he argues that cultural communities are part of the interactive relationship that makes agency possible, it is legitimate to remark that other things do too. Simply arresting the enquiry into the conditions of agency at the level of culture, as Taylor does, is arbitrary and illegitimate.

¹¹ Thomas Nagel’s *The Last Word* represents a careful and persuasive defence of the same point, considered on a wider scale – that at the bottom of every justification, be it in the area of religion, ethics, or epistemology, there must be objective principles or facts which do not depend on our point of view (Nagel, 2003).

5. The viability of justificatory holism

It will be useful to quickly retrace my steps in this paper. My aim has been to defend the viability of enquiring into the identities of individuals against Taylor. He claims, first, that the concept of identity must be understood in relation to the totality of exchanges within a community. Second, that totality cannot be reduced to the sum of individuals' contributions and properties, in the same way that social goods cannot be regarded as aggregates of what is good for lone individuals. Therefore, Taylor maintains, a strictly individualist concept of identity is fundamentally ill-conceived. I have not tried to contest this Taylor's argument directly. Instead, I have merely maintained that the scope of that argument is arbitrarily arrested. Taylor assumes that culture is the ultimate "undecomposable" factor that influences the choices of individuals, but it is difficult to see why this assumption should be accepted. If one thinks that individuals' agency is not self-sufficient but depends on wider background conditions, there is no reason to simply equate those conditions with culture. Culture, I have suggested, is also conditioned – by an underlying order of brute, or natural, facts. Therefore culture cannot be thought of as the highest, or the only, precondition of agency, or valued as such.

However my conclusions so far are insufficient to defend the possibility of individualism about identity. My discussion has only highlighted the inadequacy of one, albeit very influential, version of justificatory holism – Taylor's strongly "cultural" version. But it has not challenged the overall holist outlook. This concession, it seems, commits me to accepting that consistent and thoroughgoing holism, if it can be developed, is the correct approach to identity. This would be the approach that takes full account of the embeddedness of individuals' agency in a variety of natural and non-natural conditions. Here I want to distance myself more decisively from the holist perspective. My claim is that thorough holism is, in fact, not a viable option in the study of identity, which indirectly vindicates the analytical approach. There are two considerations to support this view, both of which can be explained by speculating on why Taylor himself steers clear from full-blown holism. It is plausible to assume that at least a part of his reason for doing so is practical: namely, that a wider concept of the background conditions of human agency precludes any cultural politics. Culture can be fitted into a system of normative claims, as is shown by Taylor's activist advocacy of autonomous Quebec; it remains unclear however whether such arguments can find room for the foundational order of brute facts. Consistent holism is just too impractical to stand as a political credo. Putting the point more generally: it is difficult to see how any kind of normative claims can be derived from a perspective that regards as valuable *all* of the various preconditions for choice.

Taylor's more philosophical rationale could be turning on a problem with justification in pluralistic societies. Aristotle's moral philosophy can be called, un-

controversially, the archetypal example of deep holism, insofar as it incorporates the category of brute, culture-independent facts that determine cultural understandings. The treatment of the gender distinction in *Politics* is a case in point. Aristotle maintains that “between male and female the former is *by nature* superior and ruler, the latter inferior and subject” (Aristotle, 1996: 68; 1254b2; emphasis added). What deserves attention here is not Aristotle’s chauvinism, but that he neither aims for, nor attempts, a *justification* of the natural superiority thesis. The remark, as well as the more comprehensive discussion in *De Generatione Animalium*, merely explains or elucidates the thesis to an audience that already lives the truth of it in everyday moral practice.¹² Aristotle can start from a shared understanding which he does not need to vindicate – the assessment that men are better placed to fulfil their natural rational function than women. But Taylor can enjoy no such privilege. The basis of shared understandings is precisely what is lacking in culturally divided societies, especially relating to such deep issues as the meaning of brute inequalities, natural predilections of human beings, matters of religion, and so on. Under radical pluralism, the thoroughgoing holist would have to *persuade* those coming from different systems of meaning, while holding onto some fixed yet uncontroversial idea of how nature determines moral practice. This task seems altogether vexed.

In sum, not only is comprehensive holism unable to deliver normative political claims, it also requires a wide agreement on what qualifies as a natural precondition for choice, which is absent in contemporary societies. Although this finding does not amount to a direct defence of the analytical approach to identity, it shows that a prominent objection to it is inconclusive. Individualism about identity is hence still a possibility.

¹² This clarificatory aspect of Aristotle’s approach comes out best in the famous passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Presumably we have to begin from things known by us. This is why anyone who is going to be a competent student in the spheres of what is noble and what is just – in a word, politics – must be brought up well in his habits. For the first principle is the belief *that* something is the case, and if this is sufficiently clear, he will not need the reason *why* as well” (Aristotle, 2000: 6; 1095b4-8; original emphasis).

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Andrej Keba

CHARLES TAYLOR I MOGUĆNOST INDIVIDUALIZMA
U POGLEDU IDENTITA

Sažetak

Iako pojam osobnog identiteta uživa veliku popularnost u normativnim debatama o javnom statusu kulture, nacionalizmu i građanskoj jednakosti, sam pojam je vrlo nejasan. U raznim disciplinama, poput sociologije, socijalne psihologije i psihoanalize, taj pojam ima različita značenja, što otežava njegovu nedvosmislenu upotrebu u političkoj teoriji. Jedna od glavnih prepreka jasnijem razgraničenju pojma identitet je metodološke prirode, a svodi se na spor oko ispravnog pristupa izučavanju identiteta. Među najutjecajnijim učesnicima u toj debati je Charles Taylor, koji smatra da identitet ne može biti definiran kao obilježje pojedinaca, već samo kao obilježje grupa. Ako je ispravan, ovaj stav podriva sve vrste liberalnog pristupa identitetu, koje sve drže da se značaj identiteta mora razumjeti u odnosu na prava i interese pojedinaca. Ovaj rad razmatra valjanost Taylorove teze, te brani mogućnost individualizma u pogledu osobnog identiteta.

Ključne riječi: Charles Taylor, individualizam, kultura, osobni identitet, vrijednosni holizam

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