

Abstract

Charles Taylor. Philosophy and Politics

Doctoral Dissertation

Szabolcs Pogonyi

2007

The aim of my doctoral dissertation is the analysis and assessment of Charles Taylor's critique of liberalism and his communitarian political theory.

The argument is divided into three sections. In the first chapter (*1. Moral Phenomenology*) I sum up the core ideas of Taylor's philosophical anthropology and moral philosophy.

In the first subsection (*1.1. Philosophical anthropology*) I introduce and analyze the main concepts (strong evaluations, moral frameworks), the relation of moral concepts and identity, Taylor's critique of procedural moral theories (Kantian and utilitarian ethics), and the relation of morality and community. The second subsection (*1.2. Moral Ontology*) recapitulates the evolution of modern moral frameworks and Taylor's critique of modernity. My dissertation focuses on political theory, so the first section gives only a brief introduction to Taylor's philosophical arguments.

The second section (*2. Critique of Liberalism*) offers an in-depth analysis of Taylor's critique of liberalism. First I present Taylor's arguments, and then their liberal refutation. Taylor's views are systematically contrasted with John Rawls' political philosophy. I argue that Taylor misinterprets the criticized Rawlsian liberal political theory.

Taylor criticizes the atomistic individualism of liberal contract theories and claims that liberal concepts of the individual is highly problematic (2.3.1. *The Individual*). In addition, he tries to show that the Rawlsian theory of justice is not a value neutral conception, but tacitly draws on the core liberal democratic norms (2.3.2. *Neutrality*). Third, Taylor criticizes the liberal theories for their alleged instrumentalism (2.3.3. *Instrumentalism*). And last, he argues that the atomistic, allegedly value neutral and instrumental liberal political theories, if applied in politics, undermine the free and democratic political institutions of modern liberal democratic states (2.3.4. *Stability*).

After presenting the main points of the communitarian critique of liberalism, I demonstrate that Taylor misunderstands liberalism, as outlined in the political liberalism of the late John Rawls (2.4. *The Critique of the Rawls Critique*). I propose that the political liberalism of the late Rawls should be interpreted as an answer to the communitarian critiques, including Taylor's. Rawls in *Political Liberalism* answers all the points brought up by his communitarian critics. The communitarian charges that consider neutral states in-line with liberal political theories insensitive towards cultural belonging are unfounded. On the contrary, the primary aim of liberal theories of justice to provide the basic framework of political cooperation among individuals accepting incompatible comprehensive moral and religious doctrines. Communitarian critics claiming liberal contract theories do not consider substantive values and cultural belonging important miss the point of the liberal argument. Liberal theories do want to leave as much room for the persuasion of the good life as possible.

The third chapter (*Collective Liberalism?*) examines Taylor's political theory, the politics of recognition. Taylor assumes that the proposed politics of recognition is the synthesis of enlightenment individualism and romantic communalism, and it can be squared with basic liberal norms (3.1. *The Philosophy of Recognition*). I argue that Taylor's normative political approach is not systematically worked out, and it can only be understood in the view of Taylor's political writings, that are to be considered as the application of the normative model (3.2. *The Politics of Recognition in Quebec*).

Taylor contrasts the politics of recognition with liberal multiculturalism. Liberal multiculturalism is based on the normative philosophical values of atomistic individualism. Liberal multiculturalists recognize cultural differences, but do not accept

differentiated group rights. According to Taylor, difference blind approaches lead to cultural homogenization, since they assume that all the citizens belong to the political state in the same way. Such understanding of cultural differences function as “straightjacket”, since it does not make it possible for members of the political state to belong in different ways. Taylor proposes the politics of “deep diversity” to provide the possibility for members of various cultural communities to relate to and identify with the political state in different ways.

No doubt, the possibility of living a good life is limited according to liberal contract theories. There are no safeguards for liberals to maintain cultural practices – whether religious, cultural, or national. Both liberals and Taylor recognize the norm of individual dignity. In a liberal state coercion can not be applied for the sake of the survival of cultural practices, not even if without coercion cultural heritage will be lost. Liberals understand that individuals must decide whether to maintain certain cultural practices, and if they decide not to, customs and ways of life will die out. Homogenization and cultural extinction are possible (but not necessary) results of political liberalism.

Taylor’s politics of recognition wants to ensure that no culture will die out because of lack of interest. In practice this can only be guaranteed by constraining individual choices. But this is contrary to human dignity. The policies and institutions recommended by Taylor to guarantee the survival of cultural heritage are antithetic to liberal theories of justice and basic liberal political norms.

The Taylorian recognition of national and ethnic identity is very similar to the old concept of *cuius regio, eius religio*. If mother tongue is indeed the utmost basis of identity and cultural integrity, as Taylor claims, then the application of the politics of recognition endangers both identity and cultural integrity. If difference blind liberalism is a „straightjacket” that ascribes certain cultural roles, Taylor’s deep diversity is a much tighter straightjacket, since it leaves no option for individuals to choose and pass on to further generations their cultural belonging if the integrity of a culture might be endangered by their opting out. Taylor criticized difference blind, atomistic-procedural liberalism for its insensitivity towards linguistic and cultural identity, but his alternative

proposals are much more likely to lead to cultural homogenization. Communitarian multiculturalism does not yield pluralism.

My conclusion is that Taylor misunderstands liberalism, and his proposed synthesis of enlightenment individualism and counter-enlightenment organicism is contradictory. It is not the Taylorian politics of recognition, but political liberalism that enhances deep diversity.