

Must We Return to Moral Realism?

Michael Rosen

Lincoln College, Oxford

In this paper I discuss Taylor's criticism of contemporary moral philosophy and the role which this plays in his wider account of the development of Western moral consciousness, an account which I compare with Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. While I endorse Taylor's rejection of "naturalism", I deny that this entails the rejection of non-realism and I maintain that, indeed, the non-realist conception of a social foundation for morality represents the most cogent response to the contemporary dilemmas Taylor identifies.

I

Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* is a penetrating, imaginative and ambitious panorama of the development of Western moral consciousness. Combining philosophical analysis with sensitive historical interpretation, Taylor admirably resists the temptation to offer over-simplified solutions to the complex problems he identifies: his purpose is to provide a diagnosis of the dilemmas facing modernity, not to offer a glib endorsement (or dismissal) of it.

In this paper I propose to take advantage of the richness of material provided by Taylor to see whether it might not in the end be plausible to interpret the developments he deals with in a somewhat different light.

My strategy falls into three parts. First, I shall discuss critically some of the concepts which provide the intellectual framework for Taylor's wide-ranging interpretation of Western culture. Second, I shall compare Taylor's reading of the path leading to modernity with another celebrated contemporary interpretation: Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. I shall argue that Blumenberg's account of the inner tensions in Judaeo-Christian thought adds a valuable extra dimension to the understanding of the background to modern moral consciousness. Finally, I shall take issue with the perspective from which Taylor formulates his understanding of our current situation: if we are faced with a dilemma in sustaining our moral life, it will only be resolved, it seems to me, in a way that is distinctively modern.

II

Sources of the Self opens with a discussion of the nature of morality which draws upon and amplifies Taylor's own earlier work [1], arguing for a form of moral realism against the emotivist and instrumentalist attitudes prevailing in much of contemporary moral philosophy. Taylor's enterprise is more than just an exercise in moral philosophy narrowly construed, however: the conception of morality which he takes to task is profoundly rooted in contemporary culture, he believes, and can only be properly understood when it is set in that context. Taylor's argument is therefore conducted in two directions at once. To probe the weaknesses of non-realist moral philosophy is to reveal an antinomy with far-reaching consequences for the character of social and political order. At the same time, an examination of the development of the wider culture will reinforce the case against non-realism for it will do what no merely analytic approach can achieve: lay bare the sources of non-realism's appeal sources which are perhaps hidden from its own most convinced adherents.

Taylor's argument has its foundation in the phenomenology of moral experience. Non-realism, he charges, gives an analysis of moral judgement which is at odds with that experience and so it is forced to go in one of two directions: either to become a form of moral revisionism, advocating a radically reduced view of the nature of the good, or else to defend an account of the nature of morality which contradicts moral practice some kind of an "error theory", in effect. But Taylor completely rejects this second possibility: "If non-realism can't be supported by moral experience then there are no good grounds to believe it at all". (p.60)

Non-realism is subjectivist if moral goods are not part of the objective order of reality, where else could they be but in the minds of individuals? and yet, apparently paradoxically, it is precisely in the picture which it presents of the nature of the subject that Taylor finds non-realism to be most at variance with the character of moral experience. For it is fundamental to our moral nature that we should see ourselves as persons living lives which make sense and this is only possible if those lives are experienced as being embedded in a framework of ends which we take to be valuable independently of our choices. Non-realism reduces the self to an aggregation of choices and experiences but neglects the crucial role which our embeddedness in practices plays in the formation of our sense of continuing identity.

Non-realism fails then, according to Taylor, to do justice to the nature of our moral experience. And yet there is also something at least partially right about it. For the image of the detached self which for the non-realist forms the locus of moral value corresponds to a fundamental aspect of our own self-understanding: the disengaged self is a self which is free to reject whatever claims are made upon it from outside as being extrinsic to its own identity. This ideal of independence forms a central part of our modern self-understanding and hence (since Taylor considers it absurd to separate the nature of the self from the way in which it is interpreted) of the modern self itself.

On Taylor's account, many of the most pervasive features of modern moral philosophy flow from the commitment to a disengaged self. The sharp separation between facts and values, the concentration of moral philosophy on questions relating to obligation, and the implausibly sharp separation between moral values and non-moral ones are consequences of the subject-centred approach to moral value.

Against this, Taylor's own position presents four crucial points. Human lives, first of all, are lived within frameworks of value. Our ends and inclinations are subject to a process of critical reflection which Taylor calls "strong evaluation" and we can understand them fully only by means of a form of description from which the question of their intrinsic value cannot be excluded. It is this broad process of evaluation which provides the environment from which more abstract ideas about morality

general conceptions of right and principles of conduct emerge. In other words, morality should be seen as an ineliminable part of human beings' search for self-identity rather than as a constraint imposed externally on the pursuit of individual goals.

This view of morality as embedded in specific practices might seem to commit Taylor to a pluralism of value and the fact that much of our moral reasoning consists in the application of general principles to individual cases would therefore seem to contradict his view. But general principles do have a place, Taylor believes. Not all goods are equal in status. Some goods (for some people at least) are recognised as being of overriding importance whatever else is good, should there be a conflict it is these "hypergoods" which ought to prevail. Although human beings attempt to integrate their conceptions of the good so as to be consistent with the hypergoods they acknowledge, the claims which such goods make will typically be in tension with other values: perhaps it is only the saint or the "moral masochist" (as Freud terms it) who can live a life of unflinching commitment to a single hypergood. Nevertheless, such lives remain an ideal for many who know that they will fail to realise it, and the tension between hypergoods and the more mundane considerations which they trump has remained a constant element in the moral life of the West.

The third and fourth salient features of Taylor's account are closely connected to one another. There is always, Taylor thinks, a general commitment to certain goods implicit in the way lives are led "life goods", he terms them:

The goods which these define are facets or components of a good life. (p.93)

But, beyond that, these goods themselves must be seen in a higher perspective. In one sense, Taylor concedes, the good is whatever is considered worthy, admirable or valuable. Yet, Taylor believes, there is another and stronger sense in which we may consider something to be good. He introduces the idea by means of an example:

... there is something which seems to deserve the attribution [of goodness] in a fuller sense. To take Plato's theory as an example: the distinction between higher and lower actions, motivations, ways of living turns on the hegemony of reason or desire. But the hegemony of reason is understood substantively. To be rational is to have a vision of rational order, and to love this order. So the difference of action or motivation has to be explained by reference to a cosmic reality, the order of things. This is good in a fuller sense: the key to this order is the Idea of the Good itself. Their relation to this is what makes certain of our actions or aspirations good; it is what constitutes the goodness of these actions or motives. (p.92)

Such a reality, says Taylor, is a "constitutive good". But constitutive goods are not just matters for contemplation. It is essential to them that they are (and this is the fourth feature of Taylor's theory to which I wish to draw attention) "moral sources"; that is, they are something "the love of which empowers us to do and be good". (p.93) A moral source is that the contemplation of which provides the motivation for moral action. As Taylor puts it:

The constitutive good does more than just define the content of moral theory. Love of it is what empowers us to be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being. This is now part of the content of the moral theory as well, which includes injunctions not only to act in certain ways and also to exhibit certain moral qualities but also to love what is good. (p.93)

These four elements provide the constant framework within which Taylor's account of the

development of Western moral consciousness is set. But they are not themselves unchanging. On the contrary, Taylor's account is best understood as a depiction of the combined effect of two kinds of change: changes in our conception of the nature of the good and changes in our conception of its status.

In outline, Taylor's argument is that the Platonic or Stoic idea of the good as part of the ultimate furniture of the world – an "ontic logos" within which the moral order is as real as any of the facts of science – has been displaced by an internalising move, the development of the idea of the independent moral subject. This move was first motivated by Christian notions of the soul and its direct relation to God and was later reinforced by the need to find a place for the self in the "disenchanted" world of modern physical science. It might seem that the transition to a more secular world-view would leave no room for "moral sources" or the "constitutive good" in anything like the earlier sense. But, crucially, Taylor rejects this interpretation.

To be sure, Taylor concedes, the constitutive good at work in modern moral consciousness is not, as it was for Plato, the contemplation of an order independent of (but comprehending and integrating) human beings. Yet the disenchanted world does have its own underlying moral vision:

It seems to me that one can still speak of a moral source here. There is a constitutive reality, namely, humans as beings capable of this courageous disengagement. And our sense of admiration and awe for these capacities is what enables us to live up to them. (p.94)

Nevertheless our modern moral consciousness (modern moral philosophy, that is to say, and the intellectual standpoint within which it is rooted) makes a point of suppressing this fact, Taylor believes, and for this reason it is necessary to read its expressions against the grain, to interpret the texts in ways which go beyond what is explicitly acknowledged in them:

It will not after all be a matter of just recording for examination already stated positions. Sometimes these may be available, but often it will be a question precisely of articulating what has remained implicit, the moral outlook which underlies certain of these philosophies which have made it a point of honour not to admit to any such outlook. One has not just to record but to invent language here, rather presumptuously claiming to say better than others what they really mean. (p.103)

Taylor's analysis of modernity is thus itself a typically modernist theory. It is a distinctive characteristic of the self-understanding of modernity that it sees itself as in some way veiled or self-dissimulating. The idea that the modern world is a world whose true nature is masked by a misleading surface appearance received its classic theoretical expression, of course, in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism as an exploitative system which conceals its injustice beneath a facade of liberty and equality. Taylor's own argument, however, runs parallel (consciously, I am sure) to Heidegger's claim that the "question of Being" has been suppressed by modern man's "fall" into inauthenticity – in other words, that modernity has become cut off from the kind of deep questioning which alone would enable it to understand itself. On Taylor's account, the modern world's dominant vision of constitutive good is the ideal of disengaged reason. But this is an ideal which denies the existence of constitutive goods; so the dominant vision of modernity is one which maintains its hold, at least in part, by obscuring its own nature.

Is it really true, as Taylor suggests, that non-realism cannot give an adequate account of the phenomenology of moral experience? This seems surprising, given the fact that non-realists set out to give an account of morality which at least starts from experience (where else, after all, could they start from?) The problem is that non-realism covers such a diverse family of positions. Many non-realists may indeed, as Taylor alleges, be reductive about the nature of the good, concentrate excessively on questions of obligation and ignore the issue of how far our choices can be integrated into a life which is seen to be valuable as a whole. But this is certainly not true of all non-realists [#], so why should we regard these characteristics as essentially connected to non-realism?

It is at this point that Taylor's hermeneutical strategy of going beyond the explicit pronouncements of those whom he is criticising comes into play. For Taylor, the impulse towards a reductive conception of the good derives from the hidden source of non-realism's ontological doctrine: non-realism is powered by a wider commitment to what he calls "naturalism". Naturalism in the sense that Taylor is using the term is (at least partly) defined by:

... the belief that we ought to understand human beings in terms continuous with the sciences of extra-human nature. Just as these last have progressed by turning away from anthropocentric language, by excluding descriptions which bear on the significance of things for us, in favour of "absolute" ones, so human affairs ought to be maximally described in external, non-culture-bound terms. (pp. 80-81)

If we set our standards of what is real according to what could figure in the explanations of physical science then it is clear that moral values along with other irreducibly subjective entities and relations -- will not meet the standard. But why should this standard be automatically extended beyond the physical sciences? In fact, it seems more than probable that whatever standards are appropriate to and successful in physical science will for that very reason turn out to be inappropriate for describing processes which inescapably involve subjective significance:

Of course, the terms of our best account will never figure in a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. This is the complement to the anti-Aristotelian purge of natural science in the seventeenth century. Just as physical science is no longer anthropocentric, so human science can no longer be couched in the terms of physics. Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is of course dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with. (pp. 58-59)

I strongly agree with Taylor that there is no justification for the way in which much contemporary Anglo-American philosophy unthinkingly equates the material and the physical with the real. Yet is that all there is to non-realism? Is it simply a by-blow of naturalism, itself in turn the product of the ideal of disengaged reason? I think not and that, indeed, a reasonable non-realism one which stresses the epistemological distinctiveness of moral reasoning from the investigations of natural science and the ontological distinctiveness of its subject-matter from the empirical world comes very close to Taylor's own position.

The position I have in mind (and which, I suggest, is by no means foreign to contemporary moral philosophy) would deny moral realism in a way that is broadly analogous to Kant's attempt to combine transcendental idealism with empirical realism in epistemology. Just as Kant's claim that we have knowledge of appearances, not things in themselves, was intended to support rather than

undermine the realistic stance towards material objects, so this form of moral non-realism, while rejecting the metaphysical independence of values, would want to deny that this must lead to a practical scepticism about the objectivity of moral discourse.

How would such a position compare with Taylor's? Let us note first that Taylor concedes (in the passage quoted above) that values depend for their existence on human beings; that they are not "an sich". On the face of it this concedes the non-realist's essential point that values, whatever else they may be, are not part of the non-human furniture of the world?

And it is not simply in accepting the dependence of moral reality on human existence that Taylor comes close to non-realism. There is, too, the question of epistemology. Since moral realists are committed to the existence of a mind-independent moral reality it might seem natural to suppose that (if moral knowledge is to be possible) they are also committed to there being a method of discovering moral truths at least analogous to the method of perception and experiment by which we come to know truths about the natural world. But this is not Taylor's view at all.

For Taylor, moral argument has priority, both epistemically and ontologically (our moral ontology should, he claims, have the content which "springs from the best account of the human domain we can arrive at" (p.72)). In such a conception of moral reasoning there is no sharp line to be drawn between valid inference and effective persuasion; moral reasoning contains, ultimately, no criteria beyond what we can come to accept as the best interpretation of our lived experience. (p.72) And debate about such interpretation may be open-ended. Although, of course, the participants aim at agreement there is no guarantee that agreement will be achieved in practice or even (so far as I understand Taylor) that it could be achieved in principle.

To summarize, then: for Taylor, moral reality is a reality dependent upon the existence of human beings [#]; moral reasoning takes place as part of the attempt by human beings to make sense of their moral experience; and there is no presumption of the existence of an independent order (a sort of moral "fact of the matter") which would render moral debate determinate in principle. So close do these three points bring Taylor's position to that of non-realism that it seems that the dispute between them is merely a verbal one.

IV

Taylor's argument is, as I have noted, an argument in two directions: it uses history in order to try to recover the unacknowledged sources of contemporary moral life and it uses change in underlying moral attitudes as a key to explaining wider social developments. In this latter respect, the approach owes much to Weber and Nietzsche. For Taylor, whatever may be the importance of economic factors, historical explanation must be "adequate to meaning" it must take seriously agents' attempts to fit their actions into a framework of social meaning.

Of course, such an approach (as Taylor is well aware) is open to obvious objections. How legitimate is it to move from analysis of a series of exemplary texts (roughly speaking, the classic works of the philosophical tradition, augmented by excursions into theology and aesthetics) to inferences about the culture as a whole? Indeed, how useful a fiction is the idea of a homogeneous "Western culture" at all?

Rather than taking up these questions, however, it seems to me more productive to compare Taylor's argument to a contemporary account which in many ways runs parallel to it. Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is, like *Sources of the Self*, an attempt to understand the dilemmas of modernity by tracing its genesis in the form of a continuing argument motivated by human beings' search for meaning in the world.

Like Taylor, Blumenberg is concerned to trace the gradual abandonment of a cosmology which treats the world as the embodiment of divine purposes, but, unlike Taylor, he argues that the motivation for this change can be seen to lie in tensions within that original world-view. As Taylor represents the matter, the displacement of the ancient views of cosmic order had two roots: the force of the idea of disengaged reason and (Taylor is not explicit about the precise relationship between the two elements) the ontological consequences of the rise of modern science. For Blumenberg, however, the idea of cosmic order contains its own inconsistency: in the Christian context it is haunted by what he calls the "syndrome of Gnosticism". [#]

The Gnostic challenge can be succinctly stated. In so far as we are to see the universe as the creation of a single, benevolent deity, how is it possible to account for the apparent evil in it? The general lines of response which have been made to this challenge in the Christian tradition are familiar enough as are their weaknesses. Evil, it is said, is part of the price that must be paid for good. But, in that case, is not God's goodness limited by natural necessity? Or else evil is a consequence of human action, just retribution for Original Sin. But is such unremitting and vicarious punishment really benevolent? Yet, however difficult to sustain, these were the lines that had to be pursued, Blumenberg argues, if the heretical threat which stands behind the Western tradition were to be resisted; evil had to be shown either to be in some sense merely apparent or else human in origin if it were not to become a transcendent principle in its own right, in conflict with divine goodness.

Of course, the application and elaboration of this simple schema is an enormously complicated matter, but in Blumenberg's hands it is immensely powerful and illuminating. Blumenberg's achievement, it seems to me, is to have called into question an influential but in the end simplistic picture of the development of the modern world-view. On this view, modern man has achieved control of nature by means of the development of modern science but has paid for it by a draining away of meaning. What Blumenberg shows is that the search for meaning can just as reasonably move men and women away from a conception of the ontic logos as towards it; if, that is, the price of a vision of divine order is an endorsement of the world as good, awareness of suffering and evil uncaused by human beings can make that vision unacceptable. The existentialist challenge to Hegel's great theodicy of unfolding historical necessity is simply a modern version of the conflict which is inevitable when the search for a meaningful moral order to the universe is conducted outside the shadow of the doctrine of Original Sin.

Hegel's attempt to provide an account of the universe in terms which comprehend both moral and scientific reasoning represents a high-water mark of metaphysical ambition, yet the idea that our moral codes should be "based on nature" is still an important if necessarily somewhat inarticulate presence in modern moral consciousness. To follow Blumenberg, the problem is not simply how to reconcile a teleological vision of natural order with the findings of the empirical sciences, but whether any such vision is even morally acceptable. Does the idea of a life lived according to nature represent a coherent ideal? The sight of vegetarian animal-lovers feeding their cats on vegetarian pet-foods may strike many of us as absurd. Yet the dilemma it expresses is real and profound. Strong and admirable principles seem to require us to stand out against the taking of animal life. Yet, if we feel the force of such claims, can we nevertheless sustain a sense of emotional identification with nature? Or are we

condemned to retreat into a chilly subjectivism, living our lives in a way which is consciously at odds with the natural order?

V

The moral crisis we face, in Taylor's view, is not that the citizens of modern Western societies no longer hold views about right and wrong or that they disagree irretrievably about the content of moral codes. The problem is more fundamental: the absence of a shared understanding of the basis for ethical judgement in general and the lack of a stable relationship between moral and other values. According to Taylor, modern culture is divided in itself between "disengaged instrumentalism and the Romantic or modernist protest against it" (p.498): the ideal of disengaged reason deprives us of the framework of meaning within which alone our moral life could be given a wider significance.

The way in which Taylor traces the effects of this conflict is unfailingly illuminating. But what is the remedy? The fact that the contemporary sense of meaninglessness typically takes the form of nostalgia for a lost order does not guarantee that such an order is necessarily recoverable -- or, indeed, that it ever existed. Yet the sheer fact that this attitude is so pervasive is itself immensely significant.

On the face of it, there are two possible responses. We may think that existential homesickness is simply one of the burdens of maturity and that we must accept that morality is no more than an arbitrary human creation -- heroic, of course, in a sense, but, in the end, no more than a biologically or socially necessary illusion. Or we may hope, with Taylor, that a new vision of transcendent order is possible to remove our sense of loss. Yet, if Blumenberg is to be believed, such a vision is inherently unstable -- it can be no more than an ephemeral romantic epiphany on pain of having its inner contradictions exposed.

If this is the choice we face then it is a painful one indeed. But is it? It seems to me that the idea that the only alternative to a vision of morality founded in natural order is a corrosive sense of moral contingency may itself be the product of the kind of attitude which Taylor calls "naturalist". It draws upon a powerful metaphysics according to which whatever is not necessary in the way in which the facts of natural science are necessary -- "out there" to be discovered whether we like it or not -- must be seen as arbitrary, a "mere convention".

If contemporary society faces a moral crisis then it lies, it seems to me, in great part in the hold that this metaphysics has upon us. On the individual level, it is simply not true that we choose our values: no one has ever decided to love their children. The sense of arbitrariness which threatens the non-realist view of morality involves the application of an analogy: it is as if our morality had been imposed upon us by a subject more powerful than ourselves -- society or the processes of evolution.

Is this a cogent worry? We can look at our values from two standpoints. On the individual level, our values seem necessary to us; on the wider level, they are conventions, set by the "choice" of society. But why should the existence of this wider perspective be more undermining than the idea that values have been set by nature or God? Why should the one view seem threatening and the other not?

There is, of course, the problem of relativism: the idea that our own value-system might be only one among several equally plausible rival possibilities is a natural and proper concern. Yet here Taylor is surely entirely right. Although we cannot exclude relativism in principle, we should not allow it to worry us in practice until we have reason to suspect that a genuine alternative to our own codes exists. And, in fact, there is very little evidence for this. The existence of vastly different forms of social life can be better explained by the diversity of contexts within which human beings live than by radical disagreement as to the fundamental principles of conduct. If relativism continues to worry us despite this it seems likely that the reasons are metaphysical rather than practical: the need for a sense of objectivity somehow stronger than what we can take from the idea of our moral lives as making sense within a framework of social practice. As in epistemology so in moral philosophy: scepticism is most often a reaction to measuring the human mind against standards which are too extreme for it to meet.

To see morality as social should not, then, make it seem any less objective unless, that is, we are prisoners of a conception of objectivity which takes only those things to be real which can be discovered in the experiments of natural science. To free ourselves from the hold of this prejudice and here I fully agree with Taylor is a necessary condition for emancipating ourselves from the sense of rootlessness which is the practical consequence of moral scepticism.

But is it sufficient? Or must we move beyond this to a vision of morality as rooted in a natural order? Taken simply as an order of laws discoverable by science, nature is no more objective a foundation for morality than society. Yet when people think of the natural order as, in Taylor's sense, a "constitutive good", they remain haunted by an extremely strong conception of the character of that order. As Taylor puts it, the constitutive good is a vision of rational order. Compared to this neo-Platonic or Hegelian conception of rationality, mere social or biological necessity is bound to seem something weak or contingent.

Nevertheless, the loss of this ideal is not something distinctively modern or, indeed, secular. An intrinsically rational order is not simply an order chosen by God: it is the order which has been chosen by God because it uniquely satisfies the requirements of goodness. But, as Blumenberg shows, just this strong demand for rationality seems to be incompatible with a universe in which natural evil is a persistent feature. If realism in Taylor's sense requires us to see morality as rooted in an intrinsically rational order of this kind, then I fear that it will do no more than drive us back to these old antinomies: to retain the sense of God's benevolence man assumes the burden of evil himself. To seek the foundations of moral order in a reality which is social, not transcendent, seems to me the only possible way of finding a path between the impoverished subjectivity of disengaged reason and the impossible yearning for the ontic logos.

REFERENCES

Blumenberg, Hans 1983. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press.

Guenther, V.J. 1978. "Der Dichtung Schleier". *Arcadia*, 13, pp.255-67.

Taylor, C.M. 1985. *Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Michael Rosen, Lincoln College, Oxford OX1 3DR, Gt. Britain

