

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Philosophical Papers*, 2 vols. CHARLES TAYLOR. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 294 p. and 340 p. Each volume: cloth \$39.50, paper \$12.95.

"When a man tells me that he is neither of the Right nor of the Left," wrote the French political commentator, Alain, "then I know that I am talking to a man of the Right." It is easy to feel this way about analytical philosophy. Was there ever a philosophical tradition with a less articulated account of its own historical distinctiveness?

Recently, however, there have been a number of attempts to throw the background assumptions of analytical philosophy into relief by examining it from a historical perspective. One thinks, in particular, of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, as well as Charles Taylor, whose *Philosophical Papers* are here under review. What these undertakings have in common is that they aim to pass from the level of particular arguments to a historical standpoint from which the arguments can themselves be displayed as embodying assumptions and preconceptions taken over unreflectively from the wider culture. All three authors would agree with Hegel's view of philosophy as "its own time captured in thought." In each case, a certain central area of philosophy, it is claimed, is so far penetrated by the prejudices of a scientific culture as to undermine the value of the entire enterprise.

What, though, is the status of such criticism? Is it that philosophical arguments are assessed and shown to be inadequate in their own terms and according to their own standards? If so, then the point of moving beyond the terrain of philosophical dispute as conventionally understood is not to inquire whether the beliefs in question are true, but to ask a further, distinct question: why, given that such beliefs are *not* true, do people nevertheless continue to hold them? From this point of view, the historical approach does not represent a challenge to the received conception of philosophical method, but amounts to the conjunction of two separate enterprises: philosophy and (for want of a better word) the sociology of knowledge.

On a more radical view, however, the two aspects cannot be separated: a strict division between questions concerning the origins and motives of beliefs, on the one hand, and questions regarding their validity, on the other, is itself part of the Enlightenment tradition which is being called into question. Historical considerations may themselves form part of the argument as to whether to hold a partic-

ular philosophical view or not. In this case, the methodological status of the criticism does, indeed, become problematic. For what would count as a reason to accept *that* as a procedure for philosophical argument? Would it, too, be historical in character?

In what follows, I shall show that the position advocated by Taylor in his *Philosophical Papers* does, indeed, depend on such a broad conception of philosophical inquiry. This is not to say that Taylor's position is invalid (or, indeed, unattractive), but that the arguments it presents fall short of what would be ideally conclusive—the strict entailment of his position by reasons that all parties would acknowledge as compelling. Taylor would argue that such an ideal of proof is part of the Enlightenment view of philosophy. In fact, for philosophy, “[as] for any hermeneutic explanation, interpretive plausibility is the ultimate criterion” (vol. I, p. 7).

I am broadly in agreement with Taylor on this issue, but it opens up a possibility that I believe he does not sufficiently consider: that more than one interpretation may turn out to be finally plausible. If so, then Taylor and his opponents may face a kind of “Mexican stand-off”; each position—though clearly mutually incompatible—may be sufficiently supported by internal reasons as to appear rational to those who hold it, while being unable to disarm the other on the other's own ground.

The subject matter covered in the *Philosophical Papers* ranges from the philosophy of mind and action through to the philosophy of social science and political theory. It is impossible to overpraise the manner in which it is presented. Each essay is clear, vigorous, vivid, and unpretentious. They are the writings of a man whose conviction of the merits of what he has to say is so overwhelming that he is happy—indeed, eager—to place his cards as plainly as possible on the table.

What unifies this apparently disparate material is the attack on a doctrine that Taylor calls “naturalism.” Naturalism is not simply the general view that man can be seen as part of nature—that, Taylor agrees, would be accepted in some sense or other by everyone—but the more specific belief, he claims, that the nature of which man is part is “to be understood according to the canons which emerged in the seventeenth-century revolution in natural science” (vol. I, p. 2).

Naturalism has dominated analytical philosophy, Taylor believes. Yet naturalism, he claims, “cannot cope with our understanding of the self”; there are aspects of that understanding—chiefly, that we are self-interpreting beings for whom things have significance in a strong sense—which “cannot be captured by a scientific language which essentially aspires to neutrality” (vol. I, pp. 3/4).

As represented by Taylor, then, the central core of naturalism is its adherence to the canons of seventeenth-century natural science. But what this amounts to is difficult to answer, for Taylor's interpretive strategy proceeds on two levels. At one level, a crude and obviously unsatisfactory view is presented which (as Taylor himself would no doubt admit) no naturalist would accept as an accurate representation of his position. The claim, however, is that the crude form of the view is something like an ideal type—it expresses the unacknowledged source of the more sophisticated versions of the view's appeal and forms a model from which actual theories depart only at the price of a loss of content. Utilitarianism is an example. Not all utilitarians are simple hedonists. But, to the extent that utilitarianism departs from that naive basic model, so, Taylor believes, utilitarianism loses the connection to the deep source of its own appeal: the idea of an objectively calculable resolution of all moral dilemmas.

In their crudest form, one supposes, the canons of seventeenth-century natural science might amount to something like this: what is real in the highest degree is matter in motion and true explanations must reduce to the mathematical laws governing that. No one now takes such a simplistic position (perhaps, indeed, no one ever did), but it inspires, Taylor claims, two related beliefs. First, there is an ontological doctrine—a desire to account for the world as composed solely of what Taylor calls "non-anthropocentric" properties. Second, there is a reductive impulse in favor of causal explanations framed in terms of such properties.

How might the naturalist respond to this? It is very hard to defend oneself against attack at such a high level of generality. Taylor does not accuse the naturalist of believing in any particular list of ultimate properties, but merely that whatever properties are to be ultimate must be "non-anthropocentric"—a characterization which is itself left rather unclear. Nor will there be many naturalists who believe that all higher-order theories can be eliminated in favor of some single basic level of explanation. But, if not this, then to what does the charge of "reductionism" amount? For such reasons, there is some temptation to dismiss Taylor's whole enterprise as conducted at a level too vague to engage with the specific contours of the theories under attack.

Yet it is also clear why Taylor is forced to present his argument in the way he does. If his case is to have the kind of generality to which he aspires, it must be framed, not at the level of the specific doctrines that take the foreground in debate, but at the level of the back-

ground beliefs that motivate them. A more powerful reply would take up Taylor's challenge at this level.

Naturalism is, Taylor says, "manifestly reductive"; just as utilitarianism is inspired by hedonism, so behaviorism is the ideal form of naturalism:

... the ideally simple theory of this objective kind would be a behaviorist one, where we could correlate physical features of the environment with movements of the organism; and this helps account for the continuing obsession with this wildly implausible approach to the science of man (vol. I, p. 51).

But surely, the naturalist will object, it is a gross caricature to depict naturalists as closet behaviorists, the more so when the explosion of modern cognitive science—psychological functionalism, AI research, computational linguistics, and so on—seems to point in just the opposite direction: that physicalist accounts of complex goal-directed systems do not (and cannot) aim toward the elimination of higher-order predicates in favor of simple physical ones.

Taylor takes up this crucial issue in a discussion of Jerry Fodor's *The Language of Thought*. Since Fodor explicitly defends the irreducibility of psychology to physics, he would, it would appear, provide a counterexample to Taylor's view that modern naturalism is reductionist in motivation. But this is not so, Taylor believes. Although cognitive psychology does not aspire to an explanation that eliminates everything but the physical features of the environment and the motions of the organism within it, reductionism comes in at an earlier stage: in the move from our own account of ourselves as agents to a scientifically-oriented psychology that accounts for what we do in computational terms. The issue, then, is not the elimination of features that reflect significance and interpretation as such, but whether the equivalent of such features found in cognitive psychology forms an adequate starting point for understanding them in the human context. Taylor believes that the supposition is absurd:

What we normally understand as the predicates of psychology . . . plainly do not apply to machines. Nor do we have anything but the vaguest fantasies as to how they might apply in the future (vol. I, pp. 209–210).

Human beings, Taylor claims, possess a "significance feature" by which:

... in contradistinction to machines, we attribute action to ourselves in a strong sense, a sense in which there is an answer to the question, What

is he doing? which is not merely relative to the interests and purposes of an observer (vol. I, p. 194).

Taylor's case, then, is that the significance that cognitive psychology apparently concedes is not *real* significance—and what differentiates true significance from pseudo significance is that we ourselves are the ultimate source of authority as to our own purposes. At this point, the naturalist may perhaps feel that he has treed his quarry. Either Taylor's position is purely stipulative (only human beings can have true, human purposes) or it appears to relapse into a form of Cartesianism. What else but the idea that the inner mental state of the agent has final authority could make one suppose that there is a matter of fact distinguishing between what are merely "adequate" explanations of an action and an account of what the agent is *really* doing?

But, of course, Taylor will not find such a counter compelling, any more than the naturalist will be convinced by what he will regard as arm-waving sermonizing about true human significance. Rather than pursue a futile combat, the naturalist may want to take a step back and place it in historical context. For have we not been here before? Since at least the eighteenth century, philosophers concerned for the dignity of human nature have been trying to hold back the tide of scientific enlightenment. At that time, it was organic nature whose purposiveness and creativity would, it was supposed, close it forever to the rigidities of mere causal explanation—it was no less than Kant who told us that there would never be a "Newton" to explain a blade of grass. Surely there is something absurd at the spectacle of philosophers taking up supposedly final positions against science, only to have to give them up as soon as the water starts to lap around their ankles.

Taylor is not impressed by such considerations. What they amount to, he says, is "less an argument from logical necessity than a persuasive use of historical analogy" (vol. I, p. 180). Indeed so—but Taylor can hardly object to that. Argument from history may not be conclusive, but that does not mean that it is valueless.

Yet the argument from past success can be balanced by an argument from present failure. For when the methods of naturalism have been applied to the study of man in the form of behaviorism and positivist "political science," the results have been laughable—empirical banalities and empty generalizations dressed up in pompous pseudo-scientific form. Science has, it is true, often over extended itself in the past (we should not let the example of phrenology dis-

credit the case for neuro-physiology), but Taylor's powerful and often highly entertaining demolition of behaviorist and positivist trends cannot be discounted. Taylor might be wrong in seeing behaviorism as the essential expression of naturalism in the human sciences, but he is certainly right about its inadequacies.

If the argument from historical progress cannot settle matters, then the only further possibility is to turn to the underlying motivation behind naturalism. Although he often talks as if he had refuted naturalism in its own terms, Taylor appreciates that naturalists do not accept his arguments as conclusive:

... the long experience of polemic against naturalist views on the epistemological level of the philosophy of science, the sense of futility when one fails to carry conviction against what seem ultimately absurd views, convinces me that the real issue lies elsewhere (vol. I, p. 6).

It lies, in the end, he claims, in naturalism's moral appeal, insofar as it is sustained by a certain attractive picture of human agency, that of the disengaged identity, free from the limiting constraints of empirical contingencies and traditions. To show this would be the final refutation of naturalism:

... to show that its opponents understand it better than it does itself, that indeed the phenomenon of people believing in naturalism was only explicable in terms of a rival incompatible theory (vol. I, p. 6).

But it is just here that Taylor's argument is weakest. For although he can certainly claim to have shown that one is not compelled to accept naturalism as a method in the human sciences on grounds of reasonableness alone, his attempts to construct a historical interpretation of the development of the modern identity are simplistic and misleading.

Like so many philosophers who take inspiration from the Continental tradition, Taylor treats Cartesianism as the ideal type of modern philosophy. An ontology of the world as extended matter is coupled (quite mysteriously) to an isolated but self-certain conscious agent. It is the appeal of the latter which, it is alleged, sustains belief in the former.

But to treat Descartes as the founder of the naturalist view of agency is quite wrong. What it neglects is the degree to which Cartesianism was itself part of a defensive maneuver. An important element in Cartesianism was the attempt to accommodate modern phys-

ics, as far as possible, to a traditional theological view of agency: the idea of human beings as sufficiently free in the origination of their actions as to be able to bear the full weight of moral responsibility for them. Insofar as the disengaged identity has been a powerful ingredient in modern consciousness, it is this which motivates it.

To regard the disengaged identity as the fundamental motivation behind modern naturalism is to ignore, however, the extent to which naturalism has aimed to dissolve precisely that Christian notion of agency and identity. In that respect, the founder of naturalism is not Descartes but Hume (and, perhaps, Hobbes) and his rejection of moral rationalism and radical freedom. To put this together with Descartes's dualistic ontology as ingredients in a single conception of the self, as Taylor does, is to coalesce what are, in fact, fundamentally opposed endeavors.

Nor is it by any means true, the naturalist will argue, that Taylor can explain the naturalist's beliefs in a way that the naturalist himself cannot. The Weberian, to take an example, is only too well able to understand why the process of secularization should produce, not only the naturalist belief in the indefinite extensibility of the principles of science, but also the idealist longing for the consolations of belief in human "specialness."

Taylor's interpretation will, in short, be opposed by the naturalist at every turn. I have tried in this review to delineate that position as clearly as possible in limited space. But this is not intended as a refutation of Taylor, much less as a vindication of naturalism itself. I simply want to argue that the naturalist's position is not unreasonable. Taylor himself remains entirely deaf to naturalism's appeal. In the end, he stands outside it as a bemused (and slightly exasperated) anthropologist. What I have tried to suggest is that this is not necessarily the final standpoint: that a perspective exists from which it is possible, consistently, to feel the force of both claims.

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