

“POETRY MAKES CLAIM TO A TRUTH WHICH HOLDS INDEPENDENTLY OF US” AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES TAYLOR

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ABSTRACT: This interview with Charles Taylor revolves around some key theoretical issues that emerge from his latest book. Among the topics discussed are: the existence of a universal “truth” brought to light by Romanticism; the notion of “interspace”; the importance of poetry in modern life experience; reconnecting with nature as a form of empowerment; the contribution of *Cosmic Connections* to Taylor’s account of the ethical and spiritual sources of modern identity.

Questa intervista con Charles Taylor ruota attorno ad alcune questioni teoriche chiave che emergono dal suo ultimo libro. Tra i temi discussi: l’esistenza di una “verità” universale portata a galla dal romanticismo; la nozione di “interspazio”; l’importanza della poesia nell’esperienza di vita moderna; la riconnessione con la natura come forma di potenziamento; il contributo di *Cosmic Connections* all’indagine tayloriana sulle fonti morali e spirituali dell’identità moderna.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, Interspace, Poetry, Reconnecting with Nature, Cosmic Connections

PAROLE CHIAVE: Romanticismo, Interspazio, Poesia, Riconnessione con la natura, Cosmic Connections

Paolo Costa: *To obliquely invoke the title of an influential (and controversial) book by René Girard (1961), is there a distinctive “Romantic truth” that everybody ought to know and that you try to articulate in the first part of Cosmic Connections?*

Charles Taylor: The answer to this question is emphatically “yes”. The experience that the poetry brings on comes across not only as a truth,

but a truth about something which is really important. That's what creates the communication problem. It's not just that those scientific-minded can't imagine, let alone accept such a "subjective" truth, and want to reduce the experience to a subjective feeling. There also is the problem that even those who are willing to believe us, but don't share the reaction, may not understand us: the problem of finding an adequate language of communication. Someone who is tone deaf to poetry, but doesn't share the prejudices of the scientific-minded, may still remain closed to our experience.

Probably, the most interesting new tool for understanding that you develop in your last book is the notion of "interspace". Interspace is like an interface between what is out there independently of us (or "absolutely", to quote Bernard Williams, 1978, p. 66) and a mere subjective projection. Am I wrong to think that it can be taken to be a re-formulation of an insightful distinction you made between subject-relatedness (i.e., being-relative-to-a-subject) and subjectivism in the past (Taylor 1985)? I mean, what you are gesturing at, here, is the insight that what is taking place in such an interspace is worthy of consideration, is "real", is not a mere "delusion", aren't you?

Yes, the point here is that I cannot accept the idea that the experience is simply subjective, on all fours with a feeling of comfort, or feeling a cool breeze blowing on us. In other words, that the experience makes no claim to a truth which holds independently of us. The category in which our religious convictions fall, when we feel them strongly. But just as the believer in this case will readily admit that his sense of God is woefully inadequate, so the reader who feels the "force" running through all things when he reads Wordsworth will admit that this force while real may have features beyond his experience, a reality *an sich*, as it were.

What the committed reader gets, willy-nilly, from reading your book is a deeper sense of the importance of poetry in modern life. Modern poetry

(like modern music, like modern visual arts) enables us to have access to the aforementioned interspace, sometimes reluctantly (see Baudelaire and Mallarmé), and despite the modern systemic drive to disenchantment. This gain seems to be at least contingent on the way great poetry changes its thoughtful reader's gaze, makes them more aware, and significantly empowers their capacity for attention. Is this an inherent quality of the literary genre we call "poetry" or is it a specifically modern phenomenon, or even the power of a specific strand of modern poetry?

I think that opening us to this kind of interspace is a power which we encounter in some poetry, but also in some music, painting, etc. For me, it was music and poetry before the big political and civilizational questions. At the beginning, it was Keats. His poems, just the musicality of his prosody, had a remarkable impact on me. I had a wonderful teacher at Selwyn House when I was a student there — he was a poet himself, Patrick Anderson who wandered out to Canada from England. He taught us the Romantic period. He had a way of making that poetry live that blew my mind, and I was hooked for good. Someone may rightly say that I have come full circle with my last book.

"Connection" and "re-connection" are key terms in your book. They clearly are antonyms of detachment or disengagement. In your account of the modern self, disengagement goes hand in hand with a distinctive form of self-empowerment that involves, in turn, bufferedness, self-fashioning, sovereignty, Verfügbarkeit, etc. Does re-connecting with nature and the cosmos mean, then, unconditionally endorsing human fragility, dependence, or does it also involve a different view of what force, robustness, self-empowerment might be in human life?

Being open to this kind of empowering interspace — "empowering" because it give us the force and courage to approach even more what it reveals, to come closer and more open to this — is very different from another kind of empowerment, that which we get by assuming an instrumental stance to the world, and study it as an "inert"

object, rather than one with which we can be in communication. There is an empowerment arising in communication, and another arising from objectification. They are not incompatible: one can be a reverent scientist — think of Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt — but they are different. And those I'm calling "scientistic-minded" believe that real science requires one abandon all reverence.

Cosmic Connections (Taylor 2024) is the last of four big books you wrote about the making of modern identity: Hegel (Taylor 1975), Sources of the Self (Taylor 1989), A Secular Age (Taylor 2007), and now this large tome about the role of poetry in a time of disenchantment. Did your last effort make you see your whole trajectory under a different light? Do you sense any significant turns, détours, revisions, progress, or quantum leaps regarding your original project? And how distant are you now from what you saw as the end goal of your quest for a Best Account of the rise of the modern self at the beginning of your career?

I don't think my orientation has really changed since my doctoral thesis (published as *The Explanation of Behaviour*). This (Taylor 1964) was written to strike back at the Cartesian–Lockean positivism which dominated analytical philosophy in the fifties. I felt I couldn't rest until I had done something to show how erroneous and shallow it all was. Later, of course, as I explored this alternative, the negative motivation gave way to a desire to explore further this alternative understanding, through a series of studies, history of the self (Taylor 1989), the secular age (Taylor 2007), language (Taylor 2016), etc.

Hegel (Taylor 1975) is related somewhat differently to this course. It was originally commissioned for the Penguin series on great philosophers. They turned to me because no self-respecting analytic philosopher would touch it. But then my manuscript was rejected because it was much too long. But through writing it, I gained a sense of the crucial importance of the Romantic period, particularly in Germany, to the whole current of modern critique of the scientistic-objectifying stance. *Hegel* is a fore-runner to *Cosmic Connections*.

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