Summary Article: Taylor, Charles Margrave
from Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Philosophers


Main publications:


Secondary literature:


Taylor himself provides the best summary of his interests (up to 1985) in the Introduction to his Philosophical Papers. His later large-scale study, Sources of the Self (1989), was foreshadowed there, but his central interest has not changed otherwise: he calls it ‘philosophical anthropology’ (1985, p. 1). What he has opposed has also remained constant: ‘a certain vision of man, an associationist psychology, utilitarian ethics, atomistic politics of social engineering, and ultimately a mechanistic science of man’ (1975, p. 539). He has always wanted to argue against the ‘understanding of human life and action implicit in an influential family of theories in the sciences of man. The common feature of this family is the ambition to model the study of man on the natural sciences’ (1985, p. 1).

A start was made in his early, anti-behaviourist The Explanation of Behaviour (1964). The project has been continued with persuasive consistency throughout Taylor’s work, to the extent that he has succeeded in staking out and mapping the claims of what are now well-recognized, opposed positions on the philosophical battleground.

His principal themes have been the self and modern identity; theories of language and of the mind; atomism in society and political theory; the inescapability of history and morality. He has wanted to tie these together into a view of the person as defined by its social location, understandable in terms of its past and its moral framework. He has seen human freedom as the capacity of people to create their own categories within the contexts inherited through history.
Taylor ascribes the origin of his view of the person (through Heidegger) to Hegel—‘Human beings are self-interpreting animals’ (‘Self-interpreting animals’, in 1985, vol. 1, p. 45)—although his defence for this view will strike many as far clearer than those of his predecessors. A characteristic line of argument he has used is to consider what he takes to be a concept in common use—his usual example is shame—and to show how its nature determines what is taken to be human, and how such an essentially reflexive, self-determining notion eludes any form of behaviourism. Properties like being shameful he sees as ‘subject-referring’: they can only exist in a world in which there are subjects of experience, because ‘they concern in some way the life of the subject qua subject’. They ‘do not fit into an objectivist’s view of the world. This allows for an account of things in terms of objective properties, and then also perhaps for a subjective reaction to or view of things on the part of the subject. Emotions like shame do not fit into either slot’ (ibid., pp. 54–5).

Because the person defines him or herself, any definition must depend on the language in which it is framed, as well as on the moral values embodied in it by its use over time. Subjectivity must be ‘situated’—a view seen by Taylor in Hegel: ‘Subjectivity was necessarily situated in life, in nature, and in a setting of social practices and institutions’ (1975, p. 567; 1979, p. 164). Sources of the Self (1989) aimed to retrieve the historical and moral frameworks and to argue that they cannot be eliminated: ‘My self-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative’ (p. 50). What we are is how we see ourselves, which must depend on how we (and our ancestors) have seen ourselves, the languages we have used, the history of the concepts that have been used, the values that have been contained in them.

Taylor’s understanding of politics is grounded in a rejection of ‘atomism’: this, he thinks, ‘represents a view about human nature and the human condition which (among other things) makes a doctrine of the primacy of rights plausible’. Atomism ‘affirms the self-sufficiency of man alone or, if you prefer, of the individual’, against the Aristotelian view of man as an inescapably social animal (1985, vol. 2, p. 189).

His philosophy of language links together the centrality of representation and the type of objectivized mechanism (seen in cognitive psychology) which he most dislikes. These are both rejected wholesale in favour of what he sees as expressivist accounts originating, for example, from Herder, Humboldt and Hamann, through Heidegger, with Wittgenstein as a later adherent (see ibid., vol. 1, Part III).

Taylor’s thinking (like that of Alastair Maclntyre) roots present identity in concepts and frameworks inherited from the past. No explicit case is made against the possibility of critical, would-be-external examination of a present view of the self. Nor is there a determinate account of just whose view it is meant to be. Since any crisis in conceptions of self may well originate from alternative pictures presented by the natural sciences and from blurred and overlapping cultural inheritances, these could be serious shortcomings. Taylor ends Sources of the Self with an appeal to the hope which he finds ‘implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism’ (p. 521), although nothing in the book lends that any metaphysical support. Further treatment is promised.

RICHARD MASON

APA

Chicago

Harvard

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/taylor_charles_1931
MLA


© 1996 Routledge

© 1996 Routledge
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA