The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism

The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism:
A Critical Comparison of Charles Taylor's <u>Sources of the Self</u> and Alisdair
MacIntyre's <u>After Virtue</u>.

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political philosophy of Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre. In particular this thesis focuses on Taylor's <u>Sources of the Self</u> and MacIntyre's <u>After Virtue</u>. These two books represent a major contribution to what has become known as the communitarian critique of liberalism. This thesis examines four fundamental aspects of the communitarian critique. The first aspect examined is the communitarian contention that liberal theory fundamentally misunderstands the nature of identity and selfhood. The second aspect examined is the communitarian assertion that liberal theory, with its focus on individual rights and autonomy, undermines community. The third aspect of the communitarian critique examined is its claim that liberalism's neutrality on questions of the good conceals the important role that notions of the good play in the moral life of the individual. Finally this thesis looks at Taylor and MacIntyre's description of modern moral discourse.

This thesis examines these four key communitarian concerns and posits potential liberal responses to all four. In this thesis two possible liberal responses come to the fore in response to almost all of Taylor and MacIntyre's concerns. The first liberal response argues that Taylor and MacIntyre describe and attack a hyper-Kantian definition of liberalism held by no actual liberal. The second key liberal response argues that the role Taylor and MacIntyre see the public sphere playing in individual's lives is more than adequately fulfilled by the private sphere. This thesis

concludes by arguing that <u>Sources of the Self</u> and <u>After Virtue</u> are best read as critiques of the social and philosophical vagaries of modern liberalism and not as actual alternatives to liberalism.

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Introduction

Four Essential Tensions

Liberalism was born as a fighting creed, founded in opposition to the rigid social hierarchies of Europe and Britain. It was also a political and philosophical response to the wars of religion and nationalism of reformation and enlightenment Europe. Today modern liberalism has lost the opponent that gave it first purpose; further much of its original adversarial context has been forgotten. In the late twentieth century, to citizens of liberal democracies, much of liberal theory appears non-controversial. Liberalism's core premises about rights, equality and the moral ontology of the self are increasingly taken for granted. All that appears to remain are disputes about details. Few question the larger propositions out of which, to paraphrase Lincoln, the modern liberal-democratic state has been conceived and dedicated. With its triumph over older social orders, liberalism has moved from an insurgent theory to an institutionalized theory. Many

citizens of liberal democracies take liberalism's founding principles as given, almost

scientific in nature, settled upon in a way not dissimilar to the establishment of

heliocentrism or the atomic weight of argon. However, unlike the undeniable truth of

heliocentrism or the atomic weights of the elements, nagging questions continue to linger

regarding the philosophical assumptions of liberalism.

Liberalism has managed to become the dominant conceptual framework but it has

not, nor perhaps can it ever, definitively set aside its more compelling critiques.

Traditionally these critiques have emerged out of the left/right schema: On the left the

Marxist and socialist critique has focused on liberal theory's commitment to the free

market and private property and the apparent contradictions that emerge out of this

commitment in regards to liberal equality. On the right, conservative voices have

questioned liberalism's commitment to liberty and equality, which they suggest may

come at the expense of stronger social and moral norms. Aside from these, in the last

fifteen years a new critique has emerged, or at least a new incarnation of an older

critique: the communitarian critique. This critique focuses on liberalism's depiction of

the self, the relation of the self to the community and to conceptions of the good, and the

character of modern moral discourse. By focusing on these first premises, which

undergird liberalism's commitment to equality and individual liberty, the communitarian

critique places itself outside of and prior to the traditional critical dichotomy of left and

right. Two of the most cogent and compelling voices of this new critique are the

philosophers Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre. This thesis will critically examine

the criticisms of liberal theory and practice offered by these two thinkers and the positive alterations and outright alternatives to modern liberalism that they advocate. This thesis will also critically examine the liberal response to Taylor's and MacIntyre's work.

In order to do justice to both modern liberalism and to the work of Taylor and MacIntyre the breadth of philosophical inquiry regarding their work must necessarily be quite narrow. Instead of tackling every aspect of both liberalism and the communitarian critique thereof, this thesis will look at four aspects of liberalism and the communitarian critique that are fundamental to both. In interrogating *Sources of the Self* and *After Virtue* this thesis will look at (1) the moral ontology of the self, (2) the self and conceptions of the good, (3) the self and community, and finally (4) the character and content of modern moral discourse. Each of these aspects, when posed to both Taylor and MacIntyre, reveal strengths and weaknesses in their argument. On a subtler level however, each of these questions seems to reveal not so much alternative answers, liberal and communitarian in nature, but a tension between conflicting intuitions about the self, the good, community and the desired form of moral discourse.

As already suggested, Taylor and MacIntyre's work will be examined primarily as it speaks to four key modern concerns. It is necessary given the sheer breadth of both of their endeavours that things be overlooked or neglected in this process, in particular the impressive moral genealogies that both philosophers offer. However, important aspects of these genealogies as well as other important facets of their work will at least be hinted at through a discussion of the four questions I intend to examine.

The Self

The communitarian critique, as it is presented in *Sources of the Self* and *After Virtue*, begins with a critique of the liberal conception of self. Taylor and MacIntyre accuse liberals of positing the existence of an antecedently individuated self. As Mulhall and Swift observe in *Liberals and Communitarians*, the modern liberal picture of the self is an incomplete picture of human selfhood. The communitarian claim, present in different forms in both Taylor and MacIntyre, is that "...an antecedently individuated conception simply cannot account for some full range of human moral circumstance and self-understanding."[1] It is this claim that lies at the heart of Taylor and MacIntyre's critique of liberal theory.

This thesis will closely examine this claim and discuss at length the alternative picture that Taylor and MacIntyre offer in its place. This alternate picture places great emphasis on the ways in which we are born into a cultural, socio-economic and normative milieu. MacIntyre captures this aspect of human experience neatly by employing a metaphor of action in a play in which we are cast at birth: "We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays the subordinate parts in the dramas of others."[2] For both Taylor and MacIntyre, this is a more accurate

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[1]Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, Liberals and Communitarians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. viii.

[2] Alisdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Second Edition, NotreDame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), p. 213.

rendition of the self's way of being in the world than that offered by modern liberalism. This is one of the essential tensions in the liberal-communitarian debate: the tension between recognizing the ways in which we are shaped by our surroundings and whether or not those inherited surroundings can entail moral obligations, on the one hand, and the liberal desire to maximize the self's range of options, on the other.

In closing the discussion of selfhood this thesis will examine possible and actual liberal rejoinders to the critique offered by MacIntyre and Taylor. One aspect that will be treated will be the accuracy of Taylor and MacIntyre's definition of liberalism. The second critique of Taylor and MacIntyre, one very much connected to the first, will centre on the question of description versus prescription as it regards liberal treatments of the self.

The Self and Conceptions of the Good

This thesis will also examine Taylor's and MacIntyre's claim that liberals have misapprehended the moral place of conceptions of the good. It will examine their charge that liberal theory fails to provide us with a moral language which can countenance questions concerning the good. Taylor and MacIntyre further claim that liberalism has misconstrued the moral place of conceptions of the good by claiming that any conception of the good is always up for potential revision or reappraisal. In the construction of the liberal argument this claim is made possible by the premise that the self is ontologically prior to its ends. The self, on this view, always stands at a certain distance, or potentially stands at a certain distance from its conceptions of the good; none are deeply constitutive

of its being. This points to a second vital tension that comes out in the liberal-communitarian debate, and in particular in *Sources of the Self* and *After Virtue*. This is the tension between goods as objects of choice and goods as sources of identity. For Taylor and MacIntyre they are unquestionably the latter. The crucial goods in our life, they both suggest, are crucial to our sense of who we are. Again in Taylor and MacIntyre a tension emerges, which will be drawn out in this thesis: The tension between moral necessities, in this case a good which informs our actions and defines our identities, and the strong desire for liberty to choose among goods which may cause us to become lost.

Taylor and MacIntyre are particularly brutal in their respective critiques of liberal theory's understanding of the role of the good. After treating their critiques this thesis will turn to how liberals can respond to Taylor and MacIntyre. Further, this thesis will look at the perils of affirming a particular public good, perils which motivated the early liberals such as Locke, Hobbes and Constant.

The Role of Community

A third aspect of philosophical agreement between Taylor and MacIntyre that will be explored surrounds the question of community. Both philosophers charge modern liberalism with badly misapprehending the significance of community. Taylor and MacIntyre assert that community is the crucible in which both the self and the constitutive goods which it seeks are formed. They argue that individual is constituted by the roles that are projected onto him by the relationships he is born into and/or undertakes. Moreover, the goods that he comes to value are also constituted within a

given cultural context. As MacIntyre remarks: "what is good for me has to be the good for one that inhabits these roles. As such I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations."[3] Liberals themselves have remarked that this may constitute the most compelling aspect of the communitarian critique of liberalism. It has encouraged questioning by liberals of liberalism's focus on the priority of individual rights. Such a focus, many liberals now acknowledge, fails to recognize that these rights can sometimes be "justifiably overridden in order to protect the goods of the community or serve community values."[4] According to Taylor and MacIntyre, liberals fail to recognize is that the good of community is a necessary condition for the existence of self: "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to who surround it."[5] Underlying a great deal of agreement between Taylor and MacIntyre on the social origin of the self lies a critical tension which will be unpacked in this essay. It is the tension that exists between self-discovery and self-creation. This powerful tension points to the conflicting moral intuitions underlying both sides of the liberal-communitarian debate, intuitions with important political and philosophical consequences which bear serious consideration.

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[3] MacIntyre, Virtue, pp.220

[4] Allen Buchanan,"Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," Ethics 99 (1989), p. 855

[5] Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 35.

In discussing the question of community this thesis will offer some potential liberal responses to Taylor and MacIntyre. It will argue that while we should indeed understand ourselves as embedded in community that liberal theory has been motivated by an acute awareness of the potential risks to the individual posed by notions of embeddedness.

The Character of Modern Moral Discourse

After considering the portrait of the self, its relation to the good and the role of community, this thesis will turn to one final and yet crucial aspect of Taylor and MacIntyre's work: the character of modern moral discourse. Here more than at any other point their philosophies diverge. Both philosophers consider modern moral discourse to be in decline but for different reasons. In modern moral discourse MacIntyre perceives an increasingly shrill tone accompanied by an inability to resolve questions of moral significance. This, he argues, arises out of a profound conceptual incommensureability. Moral debate has become, MacIntyre argues, irresolvable, and further modern liberals have chosen, rather than struggling on towards ever elusive agreement, to settle for disagreement "dignified by the title 'pluralism'"[6]

Charles Taylor also laments the future of moral discourse under the conditions of modern liberalism, but his lament arises out of quite a different diagnosis of the modern malaise. Where MacIntyre sees interminable and irreconcilable difference Taylor sees general but shallow accord. For Taylor the concern is that in an increasingly secularized

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[6] MacIntyre, <u>Virtue</u>, p. 32.

society these shared beliefs about justice and benevolence lack the moral depth to sustain them. For Taylor, the claim is that liberal society may indeed support the values of justice and benevolence but it lacks the power to defend them. Taylor's worry is that we may be "living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence."[7] As such Taylor too, though for different reasons, sees modern moral discourse as in dangerous decline.

The response to Taylor and MacIntyre's arguments presented in this chapter will first and foremost criticize their refusal to develop an adequate defense of their positions. Treating MacIntyre's depiction of modern moral discourse his assertions will be challenged by questioning the real depth of conceptual incommensureability in moral discourse. In treating Taylor's theistic claim its brevity and textual placement in *Sources of the Self* will provide a structural grounds for critique where a substantive ground is largely absent.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis will argue a relatively simple point, but one that captures where I think Taylor and MacIntyre go wrong. Both Taylor and MacIntyre strongly believe that ideas matter, that political and social philosophy transform society and politics, and most of all that the philosophical propositions of liberalism are taken seriously by those who live within them. The problem is that Taylor and MacIntyre assume that political liberalism lives in its citizens in the way the comprehensive views

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[7] Ibid., p. 516.

it supplanted did. In this they have, I assert, misapprehended the way actual citizens hold

to liberal principles. Taylor and MacIntyre assume that the political must necessarily

beget the metaphysical and that a liberal polity must give rise to citizens who are in all

ways liberal. This in the end reveals the fourth, and perhaps most authentic, tension. On

the one side, there seems in modernity to be a deep longing for the surety of a common

cosmology and rich transcendental faith which imbue the societies with common

meaning and purpose. On the other is the equally powerful desire to be free of such

authoritative horizons to be left unmolested by the state to explore meaning and

participate in worldviews of our choosing without fear of reprisal.

Chapter One

What is it a sacrilege to destroy?... Those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul without which, short of sainthood, a *human* life is not possible.[8]

Simone Weil, *The Need For Roots*

As mentioned in the introduction, Charles Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre have both been described as important intellectual players in the communitarian critique of liberalism. An important aspect of that critique, which both philosophers develop at length, is a critique of the liberal understanding of the self. What Taylor and MacIntyre seek to do in discussing the self is to provide an alternative to the modern notion of selfhood and identity, a fuller depiction of the self which better countenances its multiple modes of being in the world. Their respective depictions of the self share many of the same characteristics especially in regards to the relevance of community and culture to the formation and sustenance of identity. This self, they assert, stands in stark contrast to the picture of the self presented by much of modern liberalism. This chapter will first outline what Taylor and MacIntyre understand to be the liberal conception of the self, then discuss what each philosopher sees as a more accurate picture of selfhood drawing out some serious political and philosophical concerns that this communitarian understanding of the self seems to entail.

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[8] Simone Weil, The Need For Roots (New York, Octagon Books, 1979), p. 129.

Both Taylor and MacIntyre focus a great deal of their critical energies on the picture of the self drawn by liberalism's key proponents. This liberal self, they assert, fundamentally misapprehends our experience of selfhood in at least two of its important aspects: (1) The liberal self is placed outside of the context of constitutive ends which give it substance, it becomes an elusive, even invisible coat rack on which one hangs one's affiliations and aspirations, (2) The liberal view of human life is segmented and compartmentalized in a way that no actual whole human life could or should be experienced. While this is certainly not the only possible vision of liberalism that can be invoked, it is by and large the picture of liberalism shared by Taylor and MacIntyre. It needs to be discussed here, I would suggest, insofar as, to understand what they propose it is necessary to understand what it is they oppose.

Liberalism and the Self

The first critique of liberalism launched by Taylor and MacIntyre that must be addressed concerns the liberal conception of the self as it relates to its affiliations and constitutive ends. Both Taylor and MacIntyre understand modern liberalism to be positing, at least implicitly, a notion of the self as antecedently individuated and ontologically independent of those ends and affiliations which it may possess at any given time. The self that is prior to its ends, neutral and able to reject or accept its ends takes on the appearance of little more than a "ghost in the machine". As MacIntyre remarks

The appearance of an abstract and ghostly quality arises not from any lingering Cartesian dualism, but from the degree of contrast, indeed the degree of loss, that comes into view if we compare the emotivist self with its historical predecessors. For one way of re-envisaging the emotivist self is as having suffered a deprivation, a stripping away of qualities that were once believed to belong to the self.[9]

For both philosophers liberalism must necessarily posit an antecedently individuated notion of the self because of modern liberalism's (as they conceive it) massive emphasis on autonomy. What emerges from this emphasis, as Taylor describes it, is a punctual self whose important characteristics of identity are not the particularities of ethnicity, religious or cultural affiliation or familial status, but rather its intellectual faculties. Taylor's punctual self is thus "... 'punctual' because the self is defined in abstraction from any constitutive concerns and hence from any identity... Its only constitutive property is self-awareness."[10] This is an understanding of the self which takes its affiliations and aspirations, even those which appear fundamental, as open to re-evaluation and re-appraisal and therefore contingent on the continued endorsement of the self. This self, existing behind its affiliations and aspirations exists, Taylor contends, outside of a context which can give any strong meaning to its actions. Actions matter,

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[9] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 33.

[10] Taylor, Sources, p. 49.

Taylor argues, as they relate to conceptions of the good and the cultural contexts which give significance to those conceptions. The punctual self, unbound from any one context or conception retains self-awareness without self-relevance, "what has been left out is precisely the *mattering*."[11] A self that exists prior to the contexts which give meaning to actions would be, in Taylor's view, lost in moral space. According to Taylor an individual who actually experienced his selfhood as antecedently individuated, were it possible to exist prior to ends and affiliations, would find such an existence unbearable. As Taylor describes it

> .. the portrait of an agent free from all frameworks rather spells for us a person in the grip of an appalling identity crisis. Such a person wouldn't know where he stood on issues of fundamental importance, would have no orientation in these issues whatever, wouldn't be able to answer for himself on them.[12]

The punctual self, the formulation of which Taylor ascribes to Locke and Hume, is understood to be an existential impossibility except in a deeply pathological incarnation. This claim: that genuine disaffiliation or detachment is an existential impossibility except as pathology, is one that we will see both Taylor and MacIntyre turn to again and again as they discuss aspects of the self.

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[11] Ibid.,

[12] Ibid., p. 31.

The second aspect of Taylor and MacIntyre's critique of modern liberalism I want to bring out is the liberal understanding of the way that an actual entire life is lived. For both thinkers liberalism is seen as unduly compartmentalizing life. In the most obvious sense it compartmentalizes life into public/private but it further compartmentalizes life into a series of roles and relationships which one is seen to don or doff as a given situation demands. MacIntyre, in particular, hones in on this aspect of the liberal picture of selfhood and sees at its source a social and a philosophic foundation.

According to MacIntyre, the social source of our experience of life as compartmentalized is the increased variety of norms and modes of behavior brought on by the variety of contexts in modern life. MacIntyre observes that the variety of modes of existence has meant that "... work is divided from leisure, private life from public, corporate from personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms."[13] This compartmentalization of our lives, MacIntyre argues, has entailed not only a constant shifting of modes of being in the world, from parent to employee to citizen to patient, it has meant a focus in individual lives on how well those roles have been performed. This in and of itself is not particularly insidious, it is the shift to this mode of appraisal at the expense of a holistic understanding of an individual's life that MacIntyre finds troubling. The question of evaluating my life has been replaced by a series of questions, how have I done as a parent, a patient, a worker and a citizen? What is lost is the understanding that all of

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[13] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 204.

these questions are subsidiary to the large question, "how have I done?" This question

phrased without a qualifier appears odd to the modern individual.

The second source of our modern compartmentalized view of human life,

according to MacIntyre, is philosophic in origin. This philosophic element, MacIntyre

posits, has a dual origin in analytic philosophy and social theory. In the first case

MacIntyre sees modern analytic philosophy as trying to separate given behaviors from the

context in which they occur. In analytic philosophy this has led to a search for basic

behavioral elements or actions. MacIntyre asserts that this philosophical approach has

concealed from view the reality that

> That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a
>
> point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking and yet one which it
>
> is necessary at least to consider if we are to begin to understand how a life
>
> may be more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes.[14]

In this modern view the search for 'basic action', MacIntyre argues, sacrifices

intelligibility. An action gains its sense only within the context of a given series of

actions which further gain their intelligibility from the context of a whole life.

MacIntyre's point is fundamentally linked to Taylor's earlier remarks regarding the

Lockean "punctual self". Where Locke spoke to ontology, modern analytic philosophy

has addressed agency and similarly posited the existence of 'punctual actions' with

equally incomprehensible or even pathological results.

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[14] Ibid.,

The second philosophic force that MacIntyre sees behind the compartmentalized view of the self lies in sociological and existential thought. He cites in particular philosopher Jean Paul Sartre and sociologist Erving Goffman. These thinkers, among others, MacIntyre credits with promoting the notion of the self as primarily an inhabitor of roles. Of the views propounded by these two, MacIntyre writes

> For Sartre the central error is to identify the self with its roles, a mistake which carries the burden of moral bad faith as well as of intellectual confusion; for Goffman the central error is to suppose that there *is* a substantial self over and beyond the complex presentations of role-playing, a mistake committed by those who wish to keep part of the world 'safe from sociology'.[15]

Both of these perspectives, MacIntyre contends, while admittedly not explicitly liberal (indeed, in Sartre's case, how could they be?), are part of a modern view of the self shared by, and originating in, liberal individualism. Further, what they contribute to is a conception of the self that sees it as little more than a peg on which to hang identities; its unity, if there is any at all, is just the unity of experiencing a variety of different roles which may or may not be connected to each other in a meaningful way, it is "a self with no given continuities, save those of the body which is its bearer and of the memory which to its best of its ability gathers in its past".[16] What we are left with, again, is a picture of

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[15] Ibid., p.32.

[16] Ibid.,

the self that fails in important ways to jibe with the way that actual people experience their particular existences.

Both Taylor and MacIntyre accuse modern liberalism of holding an inaccurate view of the self, one which fails in important ways to jibe with our own experiences thereof. For both thinkers the correction of the liberal misapprehension lies in a partial if not total inversion of the relationship between our affiliations and aspirations and our identities. These aspirations and identities, they assert, are not the subject of the self's choosing but rather are substantially determinative of the content and character of the self.

What this inversion of liberal selfhood means for both thinkers is that the search for an essential self will remain ever elusive, its existence impossible to discern. As Taylor quips, liberalism's punctual or neutral self is what "Hume set out to find and, predictably, failed to find."[17] The search for our 'inner self' cannot be carried out like the search for the Loch Ness monster or the Orang Utans of Irian Jaya because the self does not exist in relation to our inquiring intellects in the same way as these external entities. The self is both the source and the subject of our search. As Taylor remarks

> We are not selves in the way that we are organisms, or we don't have
>
> selves in the way that we have hearts and livers. We are living beings with
>
> these organs, quite independently of our self-understandings or –
>
> interpretations, or the meanings things have for us. But we are only selves

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[17] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 49.

insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good.[18]

What Taylor is indicating in this passage is that we cannot ever stand in objective relation to the self in the way we may gaze at a cypress tree and remark: "aah, there is *Taxodium Distichum*, a hardy cypress commonly called "Bald Cypress", native to the south east and south central United States."[19] We cannot do this because a crucial element of our self is self-interpretation. We constitute ourselves in part by how we make sense of our lives, the cypress on the other hand remains largely unchanged no matter how we make sense of it. MacIntyre asserts that we describe and experience our identity in narrative terms. "A central thesis that begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth."[20] The thesis that emerges is that the task of observation of human identity faces a dilemma not dissimilar from the dilemma of observation faced in quantum mechanics. In quantum mechanics the observation affects that observed, in the self the introspective act transforms that which is its subject.

For both Taylor and MacIntyre this process of self-description does not occur monologically. I do not soliloquize my way to a recognizable self, rather I am constituted

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[18] Ibid., p. 34.

[19] Lawrence Maxwell et al., Florida Trees and Palms (Miami: Maxwell Publishers, 1987), p. 115.

[20] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 216.

in what Taylor describes as "webs of interlocution".[21] These webs are the social,

familial, even national surroundings into which we are born and raised. Here the contrast

with liberalism is most clear. For the liberal, Taylor asserts, the first question is "What

am I to choose?"[22] For Taylor the first question is "Who am I?" understood as a question

about origins and surroundings:

> My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who am I?
>
> And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I
>
> define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in
>
> social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my
>
> intimate relations with the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of
>
> moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining
>
> relations are lived out.[23]

For both Taylor and MacIntyre this is an ontological claim which seems apparent, and it

is important to notice, does not seem particularly incompatible with liberalism.

Liberalism, on the surface at least, seems capable of accepting this account of the process

of identity formation. What it cannot do is protect the conditions which this account

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[21] Taylor, Sources, p. 36.

[22] In the concluding portion of this chapter the accuracy of Taylor and MacIntyre's respective characterizations of the liberal self will be more closely scrutinized and indeed challenged.

[23] Taylor, Sources, p. 35.

deems necessary for identity formation to succeed.[24] This is exactly the dilemma that

Taylor has described as fundamental to the modern malaise. Identities have always been

formed this way, he asserts; what liberal individualism has done is provide the conditions

under which this process can fail.

Taylor and MacIntyre's Understanding of the Self

Liberalism has created the conditions whereby this process can fail in part

because of its emphasis on choice and its anathemic treatment of anything that appears

arbitrary. But for Taylor and MacIntyre all life starts out as arbitrary, we have no choice

over where or to whom we are born and yet this circumstance defines for both of them

most of who we are to become. As MacIntyre observes

> We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed character-roles
>
> into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in
>
> order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our
>
> responses to them are apt to be construed.[25]

We are inducted into a community at our birth, one we grow into which is fundamental in

shaping who we are. Religious affiliation (or lack thereof), language, culture, and socio-

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[24] This is, in good part, the focus of the next chapter.

[25] MacIntyre, Virtue, pp. 216

economic status are all inherited and our identity is in large part constituted by our

relationship to them.[26]

Taylor takes MacIntyre's argument, that we are substantially constituted by the

surroundings we inherit, to suggest further that in the absence of such surroundings

selfhood is impossible. Arguing the expressivist thesis that our thoughts and feelings are

not only expressed in but also largely created by language, Taylor argues that "One is a

self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those

who surround it".[27] Taylor takes Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a one

word lexicon and transposes it to describe the process of identity construction. The

selves around us, as they represent us to our selves, and as they teach us language,

construct in fundamental ways our way of being in the world. So Taylor argues, "So I

can learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are through my and

others' experience of these things being objects for *us*, in some common space."[28] Taylor

makes a point only alluded to by MacIntyre. Both philosophers are opposed to the

strong historicist claim that the self is entirely constructed by his surroundings. For both

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[26] Notice that our relationship to them, according to both philosophers, may or may not be positive but it is still definitive. One may be raised conservative Roman Catholic for instance and later on move to reject it, but that rejection itself is formative of identity and its source, albeit in the negative, is still Roman Catholicism. I think we are all familiar, in North America at least, with the picture of the opponent of his former faith who seems as engaged with it, albeit in an agonistic manner, as any true believer. For such an individual this relationship remains fundamental to his identity.

[27] Taylor, Sources, p. 35.

[28] Ibid.,

authors there is an essential element, something innate underneath the self constructed in the crucible of intersubjectivity. As Taylor observes, "We can probably be confident that on one level human beings of all times and places have shared a very similar sense of 'me' and 'mine'."[29] So Taylor remarks that when a Paleolithic hunting group came upon its prey which then turned on a group member, it is likely that feelings of imminent and *personal* extinction probably dashed across the hunter's *mind* in a way that would not be dissimilar to the thoughts of a modern citizen confronted with an oncoming city bus[30]. Nonetheless, Taylor is committed to a great deal of our agency being defined socially and how much he attributes to nature versus nurture is a question never fully resolved. Taylor and MacIntyre both reveal an important philosophic tension in their description of the process of self-becoming. They both seem torn between understanding identity as discovered, in the way that MacIntyre speaks of inherited and imputed roles that we are born into, and identity as created, the notion that we become who we are least in part as a consequence of our free will.

Both Taylor and MacIntyre sense the tendency in their account of self-becoming towards some form of social determinism and include carefully worded caveats regarding the self's relation to its moral sources. So MacIntyre argues that

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[29] Ibid., p. 112.

[30] It is unclear, in reading Taylor, whether or not this limited picture of human identity is genuinely innate. If so it is inconsistent with earlier arguments against the unencumbered self. It may simply point to common threads of identity formation across all cultures linked to the biological realities of neo-natal childcare.

...the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its

membership in communities such as those of the family, the

neighborhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to

accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of

community.[31]

For both philosophers this notion of self-overcoming is problematic, it rebels against

aspects of their earlier arguments. Taylor in particular has argued that we develop

understandings of our most essential emotions only through our interchange with

significant others. As a result it seem unclear how we can overcome them. In response

to this challenge, Taylor comes up with a unique if not entirely satisfactory response.

Taylor faces the problem of social transcendence by arguing that such a

transcendence may in fact take place within the context of a tradition. That transcending

or even merely leaving behind altogether a moral framework may be an important

element of that framework's picture of the self. To illustrate Taylor turns to the United

States with its embrace of the importance of leaving home, and its admiration of the

archetype of the rugged individual. Taylor contends

And yet we can talk without paradox of an American 'tradition' of leaving

home. The young person learns the independent stance, but this stance is

also something expected of him or her. Moreover, what an independent

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[31] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 221.

stance involves is defined by the culture in a continuing conversation into
which that young person is inducted.[32]

Taylor views the American understanding of tradition as in important ways containing
the seeds of its own self-overcoming, thus answering at least for Americans the question
of created versus discovered identity. For the rest of us deep concerns remain.

In line with the focus of this thesis it appears crucial to focus on this tension
between creation and discovery. From the perspective of liberal theory the critical
concern and counter-argument to Taylor and MacIntyre rests on the tension between self
discovery and creation. The challenge offered to liberal theory is to accommodate rather
than resolve this tension.

Liberalism, Communitarians and the Self Reconciled?

Turning first to MacIntyre, liberals have taken issue not so much with his account
of the self as with his attack on liberal theory, an attack that he founds in part on a
perceived misapprehension of the self on the part of liberal theory. Several liberal critics
have observed that they find nothing particularly controversial or contrary to liberalism in
MacIntyre's picture of the self. What liberals tend to reject is not MacIntyre's picture of
who we are, but his rendering of the 'liberal self'. MacIntyre, John Horton and Susan
Mendus argue, "rejects the conception of a person as principally a chooser and decider,
in favour of a conception of a person as having an identity which is at least partly given

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[32] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 39.

in advance of any decisions or choices the person makes."[33] The question that needs

asking here is whether or not this is an accurate depiction of liberalism. A closer look at

Horton and Mendus critique reveals a better understanding of the relation of MacIntyre's

account of the self to liberalism's. Horton and Mendus write

> Put differently, where liberalism emphasizes our status as choosing and
>
> deciding beings, MacIntyre draws attention to the importance of the
>
> background circumstances and moral context which inform and make
>
> intelligible those choices but which are themselves unchosen.[34]

The language here has moved subtly but importantly. What is different between

MacIntyre and modern liberalism, according to Mendus and Horton, is not a question so

much of ontology as of emphasis. The sneaking suspicion is that modern liberals would

have little difficulty if any at all accepting MacIntyre's account of the development of

identity. The difference between MacIntyre and modern liberalism, is that liberals

emphasize the self as it exists in political and public space and are concerned with how

best to accommodate that self. Taylor and MacIntyre wish to look at the whole, but

looking at the whole self by no means guarantees a view incompatible with the partial

picture offered by liberals.

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[33] John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alisdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue* and After," After MacIntyre, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus.(Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 9.
[34] Ibid.,

It is not all clear that Taylor and MacIntryre have so far offered an account of the ontology of selfhood that is necessarily incompatible with liberalism. The next question to turn to is whether or not the normative claims that emerge out of that account are incompatible with liberalism. As we have seen so far, Taylor and MacIntyre can perhaps only claim that their respective accounts are genealogically more sophisticated and broader in scope than the accounts of selfhood traditionally offered by liberals. What appears suspect is the claim their accounts are importantly different.

The next alleged point of difference concerns the question of normative claims about the individual's relationship to its constitutive identities. As outlined at the outset of this chapter both MacIntyre and Taylor charge liberalism with rendering an account of the self that is unencumbered by such ends and in important respects antecedently individuated. The interesting question for Taylor and MacIntyre is how their claims based on a culturally and socially individuated self whose encumbrances are inherited not chosen differ from liberalism's.

Taylor and MacIntyre both claim that the social and cultural milieu into which an individual is born profoundly shapes his identity. However neither philosopher argues that cultural and social setting completely defines and determines identity. This claim clearly fits with the modern experience of cultural or religious disaffiliation. Of religious disaffiliation and the viability of identity Paul Kelly remarks

> This is just as well, for individuals quite clearly do separate themselves
>
> from such imposed identities without completely disintegrating. One

only has to think of those brought up in religious communities who lose their faith.[35]

To argue other than that the self may set aside even fundamental ends is to posit a position that is counter to much of our, at least western and modern, moral experience. So what are Taylor and MacIntyre left with? The sneaking suspicion emerges that on this account the answer is not much unless they hold to the claim that liberalism posits a self without characteristics, a self of which Michael Walzer writes

> The self portrait of the individual constituted only by is willfulness, liberated from all connection, without common values, binding ties, customs or traditions-sans-eyes, sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything-need only be evoked in order to be devalued[36]

Contrary to MacIntyre and Taylor, a closer look at the liberal position reveals a more sophisticated understanding of the self. The modern liberal holds, like Taylor and MacIntyre, that the individual can overcome particular aspects of his identity but this is not to suggest that the self can exist completely without frameworks of moral contexts. Liberals would acknowledge such a condition as an existential impossibility. What they do posit as possible is that we may have different affiliations and aspirations from those

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[35] Paul Kelly, "MacIntyre's Critique of Utilitarianism," in *After MacIntyre*, eds. Susan Mendus and John Horton (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 135.

[36] Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," Political Theory 18 (1990) : 8.

we now possess, and while there is a sense in which this does make us prior to our

identities it does not entail that we actual exist as punctual or unencumbered selves. As

Will Kymlicka points out

> Our self is, *in this sense*, perceived prior to its ends, i.e. we can always envisage our
>
> self without its *present* ends. But this doesn't require that we can ever perceive a
>
> self totally unencumbered by any ends-the process of ethical reasoning is always
>
> one of comparing one 'encumbered' potential self with another 'encumbered'
>
> potential self.[37]

Modern liberalism, at least in this incarnation, seems a long way from the picture drawn

by Taylor and MacIntyre, but in another important respect it is very similar to the

description of liberalism offered by both philosophers in regards to their own respective

programs. As I noted earlier, both Taylor and MacIntyre leave open the possibility that

one can leave behind the moral limitations of the context into which one is born and

leave behind those imputed characteristics one inherits. If so the question that is left is:

How is this different from the liberal contention that the self and its constitutive ends and

affiliations are always up for re-appraisal and possible rejection? As Kymlicka points

out, unless the communitarian is committed to a stronger form of determinism than either

Taylor or MacIntyre is willing to commit to, then "... the advertised difference with the

liberal view is a deception, for the sense in which communitarians view us as 'embedded'

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[37] Will Kymlicka, "Liberalism and Communitarianism", <u>The Canadian Journal of Philosophy</u> 18 (1988) :   190 .

in communal roles incorporates the sense in which liberals view us as independent of them."[38] On this reading then the differences that emerge seem to be only semantic. Where liberals like Kymlicka choose to speak of rejection or reappraisal, communitarians speak of *moving forward* (MacIntyre) or the *transcendental condition* (Taylor). Taylor and MacIntyre's view of the 'embedded' nature of the self is without a doubt an important filling out of the picture of the self that liberals and others must work with when they argue for a specific view of society or of that individual's place in it. Indeed, modern liberalism with its often explicit desire to remain "political not metaphysical" has neglected to some extent to do the intellectual work that Taylor and MacIntyre rightly see as relevant, but the question that lingers is: on the key questions surrounding the development and experience of identity, how does their picture differ from that offered, if only in a very inchoate way, by liberals?

Narrative Unity

A second major point of disagreement between liberals and Taylor and MacIntyre centres around their contention that we experience our lives primarily as narrative wholes. In this section two aspects of their argument will be examined, first is their contention that each individual life is experienced by the self as a whole, stretching from the beginnings of self-awareness in infancy to death and second that this whole is experienced primarily as a narrative. Taylor and MacIntyre thus posit a picture of the

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[38] Ibid., p. 194.

course of a human life experienced as "a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end."[39]

In the same sense that Taylor argues that there is an element of innate universally shared experience of selfhood that we share even with the Paleolithic hunter who upon seeing the woolly mammoth head his way thinks "Now I'm for it",[40] so too he wants to argue that in some form we all experience our lives as a unity. This unity, he suggests, is often occluded from view when we examine our lives in retrospect, a sentiment often expressed (I would hasten to add most likely in the recounting of events of which we are not proud) is "Oh, I was a different person back then" and as our memory of some events in our life fades this may seem a plausible stance to hold to one's history. Taylor observes that the unity of our personality is made apparent if we attempt to speak in similar fashion of our future. Taken from this perspective Taylor points out that

> If we look towards the future, the case is even clearer. On the basis of
> what I am I project my future. On what basis could I consider that only,
> say, the next ten years were "my" future, and that my old age would be
> that of another person?... It seems clear from all this that there is
> something like an *a priori* unity of a human life.[41]

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[39] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 112.

[40] Taylor, Sources, p. 112.

[41] Ibid., p. 51.

Taylor does acknowledge the possibility that in some cultures there may be seen to be a split in an identity. For example an individual may through a "a horrendous ritual passage" that may split the self, but he concludes that such bifurcated selves would, in the modern west, be "either an over-dramatized image, or quite false."[42] This hard-lined stance on the unity of the self, compared to the rather tentative tone of most of *Sources of the Self,* stands out, and is echoed in both tone and content by MacIntyre. It is a contention which will be critically examined at the conclusion of this chapter.

For MacIntyre the unity of a human life is not only something experienced by the individual self, it is expected of us by others. As MacIntyre observes,

> I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others - and I may at any
> time be called upon to answer for it - no matter how changed I may be
> now. There is no way of *founding* my identity - or lack of it- on the
> psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self.[43]

Here, in one sense, MacIntyre is taking an even harder line than Taylor. Unity is a ontological but also a social fact of selfhood. Even if through some psychological or neurological trauma unity were to cease to be for a given person it would remain in force regarding that person in the eyes of others. Setting aside the possibility of such a discontinuity or its moral relevance and turning back to the idea of responsibility over the course of a lifetime we can see how this jibes with our moral intuitions in particular as it

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[42] Ibid.,

[43] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 217.

speaks to war criminals. As the war criminals of the Second World War in particular who remain free or at large continue to age and disappear over the horizon occasionally it is argued that we should cease our search for and prosecution of them simply out of compassion for their age and proximity to death. Nonetheless it is rarely, if ever, argued that those war criminals who remain with us should be left alone because they were young men then and that as seniors they are in a morally exculpatory sense different people. We may shy away from prosecuting the geriatric but we do so out of compassion not out of a belief that the crimes they committed as young men were the crimes of another person. Considered in this context we can see how the unity of a whole life not only fits with the way we experience our interior existences but that it fits also with our strong moral intuitions about other's responsibilities.

Having established, at least by their own lights, that human life is experienced as unity and that such unity is societally expected of us, I turn now to how Taylor and MacIntyre characterize that unity. Both philosophers maintain that we experience our lives not entirely unlike a story in which we are the main protagonist. The key characteristic of this story, according to both Taylor and MacIntyre, is that it is a story directed towards a given, if sometimes not richly defined, objective. In this way, both thinkers understand the narrative of life as a quest.

The objective or goal oriented nature of human existence is described as a sense of becoming something which is coherent only temporally and with an objective if not in view at least implied. As Taylor argues, "I can only know myself through the history of

my maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats. My self understanding

necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative."[44] Notions of maturation or

regression imply a telos, a goal towards which or away from which identity moves. In

the absence of such a goal terms such as maturation and regression make no sense and

neither do notions of narrativity except in the sense in which they are held in say Camus'

L'Etranger or Kafka's *The Trial*. But in these accounts the protagonist is seen either to

be in some way pathological or in the grips of a pathological society, either way no one

envies or wishes to emulate Joseph K.

Taylor and MacIntyre argue that understanding our lives as narrative does nothing

less than make our actions intelligible. Narrative provides an interpretative and an

evaluative framework for the events of our lives. Moreover, as individual actions are

rendered intelligible in the sub-plots of our lives in which they take place (So a trip to the

video store can be understood and evaluated in terms of whether I was able to rent the

video I desired) so all our actions can be understood fully only within the context of the

larger narrative of our whole lives. To illustrate this point MacIntyre draws out the

apparently simple example of a married man gardening in his yard. For MacIntyre, a

number of different interpretations can be offered to explain this action. So the gardener

could be described as getting some outdoor exercise, or pleasing his wife, or perhaps

contributing to the beautification of the neighbourhood through flora and fauna. The

narrative structure of our lives, he argues, allows us to decide between these different

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[44] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 50.

interpretations. Of course to a certain extent he may be doing all these things but to understand the dominant motivation for his actions one must turn to the larger context of his whole life. As MacIntyre asserts

> ...intentions can be ordered in terms of the stretch of time to which reference is made. Each of the shorter term intentions is, and can only be made, intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions; and the characterization of longer-term behavior can only be correct if some of the characterizations in terms of shorter-term intentions are also correct. Hence the behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest term intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. Once again we are involved in writing a narrative history.[45]

Taking MacIntyre's argument here and applying it back to his gardener we see that the gardener may be so engaged in part to please his wife, and so this action takes place within the larger context of his marriage, that he feels obliged to please his wife and maintain a harmonious household may fit into the even larger narrative structure of his whole life envisioned as happy home and family. Operating in reverse if we assume his lifelong narrative to be dominated by a desire to play a positive role in the community, we can suppose that in the shorter term this means on some level that our gardener

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[45] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 207.

cultivates his garden in order to beautify the community. Taking narrative seriously then what we see is that the broader narrative provides a setting which makes the smaller sub-narratives intelligible and they in turn support the life-long narrative. What is crucial here is the absence of division between the different modes, MacIntyre rejects the compartmentalization he sees in liberal society, asserting that no activity can take place within an individual life and yet be somehow separate from the larger narrative, even if at times that larger narrative remains only tacitly comprehended by an individual.

MacIntyre has so far illustrated how narrative works as an interpretative framework making sense of our actions. The other crucial aspect of narrative is that it provides an evaluative framework. For Taylor this evaluative framework is spoken of in terms of placing the self in moral space, a placing not dissimilar from placing in physical space. The narrative quest of a whole life, Taylor argues, allows us to make sense not only of actions in descriptive terms so that the gardener can be understood to be "pleasing his wife", it also allows us to make sense of evaluative terms such as maturation or regression. Trivially we can thus argue that in fact our gardener is not pleasing his wife even if at the outset this was his intent and this is what made sense of his actions. Importantly, even if the gardener failed to please his wife or nurture his marriage it is within the context of narrative that these actions still make sense. Our actions make sense, according to Taylor, regardless of success or failure, insofar as they mark progress towards or away from the objective of our life narrative. Again to illustrate the point Taylor looks to the way we relate to our past and future: "In order to

have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going."[46] The sense of where we are going, Taylor argues, is not unlike the sense we have of simple spatial relations. Our ordinary journeys make sense in terms of destinations and familiar landmarks along the way, by which we can tell whether or not we are getting closer or farther away from our given objectives. Further, this idea of journey not only characterizes our experience of life but it imbues it, according to Taylor, with meaning. So Taylor asserts that

> ...our entire understanding beforehand of states of greater perfection, however defined, is strongly shaped by our striving to achieve them. We come to understand in part what really characterizes the moral state we seek through the very effort of trying, and at first failing, to achieve them.[47]

Taylor, here referring specifically to the work of MacIntyre, observes that this notion of life being understood as a story that is directed towards a goal is what "Alisdair MacIntyre captures in his notion [quoted above] that life is seen as a 'quest'."[48] Our success or failure in life, both Taylor and MacIntyre concur, can only be evaluated in

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[46] Taylor, Sources, p. 48.

[47] Ibid.,

[48] Ibid.,

terms of the quest to which we were engaged, as a result MacIntyre, in very strong

language asserts

> The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests
>
> sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions;
>
> and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for
>
> success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or
>
> failure in a narrated or to be narrated quest.[49]

So if we return one last time to our gardener, we can see how if his life is to be

understood as a narrative quest, and its object let us suppose is to be a good husband and

member of the community, then his individual actions, i.e. gardening, can be evaluated in

terms of how they promoted or hindered these aspirations, and when all his actions are

summed up, his whole life can be evaluated to see whether or not he was indeed a good

husband and member of the community. Again, notice that what is notably absent from

the discussion given by Taylor and MacIntyre is any notion of compartmentalization.

Understanding one's life in terms of a quest leaves no room for one to be, as Himmler for

instance was said to be, a loving father at home while exemplifying villainy in his public

life. In the narrative all the pieces must in some way fit and relate to one another as they

necessarily co-exist within a single unitary life, to be a monster in one locale and not in

another is to progress and recede depending on the weight of each action, they cannot

exist in tandem. On this view the phrase "at least he was a good provider" makes no

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[49] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 219.

sense. This phrase can speak to an aspect of a life, but that aspect cannot be separated out of the whole life and held up alone.

Finally the question must be asked, what is it that we should quest for? For Taylor and MacIntyre the question comes back to the notion of embeddedness. Just as embeddedness allows us to make sense of ideas such as responsibility, or love or anxiety, it also allows us to discern what it is that we should seek to become, what the object of our quest consists in. As we saw earlier, MacIntyre argues that we are born into a number of imputed roles. These roles give us the content of our quest. So he asserts "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do? If I can answer the prior question "Of what stories do I find myself a part?[50] In the pre-modern world, MacIntyre asserts, the all encompassing social order provided the answers to these questions by saying: "I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom".[51] These roles into which the pre-modern was born supply the answer explicitly to the question, for what should I quest? For the pre-modern this assignment may have seemed a burden too great to bear and he may very well have felt crushed beneath it. For the modern the problem is of quite a different sort, this is what the title of Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* captures. Where the old world may have given too many answers, the modern world may seem to supply too few, so Taylor remarks that the modern quandary is that "the world loses altogether

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[50] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 216.

[51] Ibid., p. 173.

its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing, the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of

vertigo."[52] For MacIntyre this feeling goes so far as to explain the reasoning behind at

least some suicides. MacIntyre suggests

> When someone complains - as do some of those who attempt or commit
>
> suicide - the his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps
>
> characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become
>
> unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a
>
> climax or *telos*.[53]

A quest, then, understood as part of a narrative is not only necessary to make sense of

one's life, it appears that for both Taylor and MacIntyre its absence signals pathology or

an existential impossibility which demands suicide. In the next chapter the tension

between the "unbearable lightness of being", community, and the importance of a quest

will be explored at greater length. This chapter now turns to two serious problems with

how Taylor and MacIntyre view the narrative unity of the self.

Narrative Unity, Vicious Narratives and Conversion Experiences

The first question I want to turn to is the notion that we inherit our roles and

characters and it is within these roles that we discover what is to be the content of our life

quest. The idea of being born into imputed characters is already qualified by Taylor and

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[52] Taylor, Sources, p. 18.

[53] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 217.

MacIntyre greatly in their treatment of the process of identity formation. Both thinkers acknowledge that we may transcend the limitations of the context into which we are born. What seems relatively unanswered is what happens to the 'quest' that was affixed to that context. Remembering that Taylor and MacIntyre both describe the loss of the narrative quest in one's life in the language of despair, mental illness and death, there seems an odd disjunction between the two aspects of their arguments. This disjunction is made more pressing by the reality that such a setting aside of 'quests' seem more than an existential possibility, it seems a probability. As J.B. Schneewind observes, we are not all born into 'admirable' narratives. "The function for each of us would be to perfect the unity inherent in our own individual narrative..[but] the narrative of my life might assign me a vicious sort of role;"[54] Perhaps the most readily apparent example of this one can think of is the Plantocracy of the Caribbean and the Southern United Sates in the last century. One could be born into the white slave-holding culture with its traditions and its vision of the good life, a vision predicated on the enslavement of black Africans and a denial of their basic humanity, as well as of course the enjoyment of the equestrian arts and the odd cotillion. They would certainly be called upon to live out a very richly understood narrative with a well established quest (the maintenance of the family plantation). Today the same dilemmas of bringing to a conclusion the narrative face altogether too many young men of the north of Ireland who are the sons of dead or imprisoned loyalist and nationalist paramilitaries in the six counties of the north of

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[54] J.B. Schneewind "Virtue, and Narrative and Community: MacIntyre and Morality," Journal of Philosophy 79 (1982) : 657.

Ireland. Such individual's language and way of being in the world would point to a clear

unity in his life and an obvious means of living it out. Would the individual who found

the quest dictated by these roles unacceptable be lost in a world devoid of spiritual

contour? Would he feel that his life had lost its meaning and his actions their substance?

Would he contemplate suicide? It is unclear how MacIntyre or Taylor would address

such individuals and yet the world is full of them.

Perhaps the answer to this dilemma lies in my next concern with MacIntyre and

Taylor's understanding of the narrative unity of a human life. Taylor in particular

describes 'our world', meaning the industrialized and liberal West, as lacking any

genuine understandings of human life that are binary as opposed to unitary. Taylor

characterizes such descriptions as either wild exaggerations or signs of mental

infirmity.[55] What Taylor and MacIntyre both seem to have overlooked is the depth to

which people appear at least to be affected by the experience of spiritual conversion. In

the Christian context there is something very real in the notion of being 'born again'.

D.E. Cooper touches on this when he writes of MacIntyre's gardener

> MacIntyre's gardening husband may be a totally transformed person from
>
> the one who was first bowled over by the woman he came to marry; and

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[55] By "binary" Taylor means an understanding of life in which a person, perhaps after some sort of purification ritual or rite of passage, considers himself and is considered by others to be a new and different individual unattached to who he was before.

his life may be radically transformed again if he finds himself on a road to Damascus.[56]

What seems to be missed by both authors is how completely experiences of the Road to Damascus variety may change someone. Certainly the letters of St. Paul describe such a massive break with the past that St. Paul becomes unrecognizable in relation to the person he was before. So too it is not uncommon to hear of others who say things like, "At that moment I became a different person", or "When he came home from the war he was not the same man". The sheer ubiquity of accounts of these sorts seems to rebel against Taylor's simple assertion that those who so claim are over-dramatizing, or MacIntyre's iron-clad assertion that "I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from the past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships."[57] What they seem to be militating against is the possibility that we can shift radically in moral space. We may overcome but we may not leave behind entirely our past, it always remains with us.

What Taylor and MacIntyre miss is the possibility that one can live, however briefly, as an unencumbered self, that this self is so stripped that what occurs is not entirely unlike a living death of the self. The tension in Taylor and MacIntyre on this issue is resolvable, but it involves only partial agreement with their original stance. The

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[56] D.E. Cooper, "Life and Narrative," <u>International Journal of Moral and Social Studies</u> 3 (1988) : 165.

[57] MacIntyre, <u>Virtue</u>, p. 221.

partial agreement is , as Martin Low-Beer puts it, "We can very well imagine people

losing their evaluative frameworks, but we can't imagine such a life-form, because the

experience of having no answers to these questions is dreadful."[58] We can agree that

living permanently without any unity or narrative direction to one's life would be

unbearable. Where Taylor and MacIntyre go wrong is in believing that this is what

occurs when one rejects an old framework. To turn again to the "Road to Damascus"

conversion experience: For the individual who has experienced conversion what has

occurred is akin to a Gestalt shift - everything looks different. What is interesting about

the conversion experience is its rapidity; St. Paul believed himself to be a different

person at the end of the day from the one who arose in the morning. What the rapidity

occludes from view is the possibility that for a time before conversion the person may

have believed in nothing from his old way of life, his old identity with its affiliations and

aspirations may have lost all meaning for him. As a result, all of the things which made

him who he was had in an important sense died. According to Taylor and MacIntyre,

such a condition connotes either mental illness or imminent suicide. But what if it

connotes a death of identity, but not necessarily of the innate part of the self that they

both acknowledge? However, there seems to be an important caveat which needs to be

added on here, and that caveat is that such a state implies pathology only if it is

permanent. As Low-Beer remarks, "We can easily imagine people losing this

orientation...people do not have this orientation all the time...but to live without it

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[58] Martin Low-Beer, "Living a Life", Inquiry 34 (1990) : 225.

permanently is *unbearable*, an existential impossibility."[59] One can, I think, move

through a period of unbearable lightness towards a new quest. It is true that it would be

terrible, but to turn back to the examples of the young IRA provo or the 19th century

slaveholder, the death of this identity without *actual* suicide seems emminently

preferable. Looking closely at the example of vicious narratives and of the experience of

religious conversion it appears that MacIntyre and Taylor, miss important ways in which

a life can be binary, how one really can found one's identity over again, not importantly

out of nothing but from something almost entirely new, setting aside that which went

before.

The next chapter will address many of the same issues which were wrestled with

in this one. The difference in the next chapter will be one of emphasis, the focus will be

not on the self, but on the community out of which the self, at least in important part,

arises. Here the questions of emphasis of the breadth of the communitarian view comes

into direct conflict with the liberal pragmatist's desire to remain ever political, not

metaphysical.

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[59] Low-Beer, "Living" : 226.

Chapter Two

This chapter will discuss how Taylor and MacIntyre see liberal theory situating

the self in relation to community as contrasted with how they see the self situated.

According to Taylor and MacIntyre the ontological propositions that liberals make about

the self have massive social and political consequences for the way that a self

understands and relates to its social affiliations. To understand what those political

implications are this chapter will first turn to MacIntyre and Taylor's contention that

liberal theory proposes the possibility of a pre-social self. Drawing on this contention the

argument will then turn to how such a self conceives of his relations to his community

and how a certain moral relation of the self to its community has become idealized in

liberal societies of the west. After examining what Taylor and MacIntyre see as

liberalism's stance on community their own understandings of the relationship of self to

community will be discussed. Finally what Taylor and MacIntyre see as the real political

consequences of liberal conceptions of community will be examined. In treating these

three areas of Taylor and MacIntyre's thought regarding community critical questions

and concerns about how accurate their picture of liberalism is and of how appealing their

alternate understanding is will inevitably arise, these important questions will be treated

at the end of the chapter.

Taylor and MacIntyre on the Liberal Conception of Community

To begin the discussion of these questions it seems a fair generalization to say that liberalism places primary political importance on the individual and its liberty. It is also fair to suggest that this focus on individual liberty is seen by many so-called communitarian thinkers as anathema to strong communal affiliations. Fundamental to Taylor and MacIntyre's critique is their contention that almost no modern liberal conception of community adequately appreciates its essential role in the moral life of the individual. Even Will Kymlicka, one of the liberals most sympathetic to Taylor and MacIntyre's concerns, in his *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, while trying valiantly to reconcile communitarian concerns to liberal theory nonetheless confesses: "There seems to be no room within the moral ontology of liberalism for the idea of collective rights. The community, unlike the individual, is not a self-originating source of valid claims."[60] Of course there are many liberal theorists who are much less sympathetic to the notion of community rights than Kymlicka, such as Chandran Kukathas who pushes the primacy of individual autonomy and independence of community to the point of caricature by arguing that any protection of community interests (let alone notions of collective rights) is anathema to human dignity. He opines that

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[60] Will Kymlicka, Liberalism, Community and Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) : 140.

In the end, liberalism views cultural communities more like private associations or, to use a slightly different metaphor, electoral majorities. Both can be the product of a multitude of factors, and neither be especially enduring, although they can be.[61]

While it is far from accurate to claim, as Kukathas does, that liberalism views community this way, there does seem to be a tension between an increasing desire on the part of many liberals to accommodate community and the strong claim, made by Kymlicka and widely shared, that there does not appear to be room in the moral universe of liberalism for the notion of community rights.[62]

Many liberals, in part as a result of the communitarian critique, are beginning to question the notion of individuals rights being treated as ever inviolable or in Dworkin's regrettable metaphor "Rights are Trumps". More and more liberals are beginning to ask if there do exist occasions or dilemmas when the strong commitment to the individual, understood as first and foremost an autonomous being whose autonomy must be

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[61] Chandran Kukathas, "Are There Any Cultural Rights?", Political Theory 20 (1988) : 115

[62] It is important to note here that when I use the term *community rights* I mean the idea of rights accruing to a given community, as opposed to rights accruing to individuals as a result of their membership in a given community. Many liberal theorists have long been comfortable with the latter notion which treats communities as aggregates of individuals, what they seem unable to accomadate is communities rights accruing to a community concieved of as a thing in itself.

defended, is perhaps misplaced. As Allan Buchanan admits in an excellent liberal

treatment of the communitarian critique

> ...the most plausible communitarian challenge to the liberal political thesis
>
> is the view that those who have endorsed the priority of individual civil
>
> and political rights have failed to appreciate that their priority sometimes
>
> can be justifiably overridden to protect the goods of the community or to
>
> serve community values.[63]

This appears to be as far as liberalism has come in terms of accommodating

community[64], but as Taylor and MacIntyre will argue, it is not so much that liberalism

has yet to travel far enough but that it is headed in an entirely wrong direction.

Liberalism, they will argue, is headed in the wrong direction because of its continued

insistence on conceiving of community as a good to be chosen from among a range of

goods, and not as a necessary condition for meaningful human agency. For MacIntyre

and Taylor what meaningful human agency implies is an ability to place decisions within

a moral context and to understand and rank a variety of goods and choices within that

context. To understand why liberalism has traveled, in their shared estimation, down this

road, it is essential to look at what they see as liberalism's philosophical history.

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[63] Buchanan "Assessing,": 855.

[64] Such accomodation may take the form of municipal zoning laws which prohibit "adult entertainment" or in the case of Quebec business and education regulations meant to encourage the use of french.

For both MacIntyre and Taylor liberalism becomes a philosophical force

detrimental to community when it posits a single idea: that the individual, in a form

recognizable to us, could exist outside of human community.[65] According to both Taylor

and MacIntyre this idea forever transformed the way in which ordinary individuals as

well as political philosophers looked at the relation of the self to the community. Taylor

contends that

> For a post-seventeenth century reader, an obvious question arises: how
>
> does the community get started? Where does it gets its authority to
>
> determine the nature of political authority over its constituent individuals?
>
> Before the seventeenth century this issue is not raised. The big innovation
>
> of contract theorists from Grotius on is that they do address it; it now
>
> begins to appear self-evident that it has to be addressed.[66]

When this question becomes one that is almost naturally addressed what arises inevitably

out of it is the notion of consent: if the individual can be conceived of as existing prior to

or without the community then why and under what conditions does he agree to enter?

Under what conditions may he exit? The individual immersed in his community is

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[65] For both philosophers the importance of the pre-social self is not historical but philosophical. Whether or not a pre-social existence is existentially possible or historically actual is unimportant in terms of their argument. What matters, according to Taylor and MacIntyre, is how the idea transformed the way that the individual was understood.

[66] Taylor, Sources, p. 193.

replaced by the idea at least of "the individual on his own. Membership of a community

with common power of decision is now something which needs to be explained by the

individual's prior consent."[67] What is fundamental is that people start off as individuals,

or as Taylor puts it "political atoms";[68] they don't start off as members of a community.

Who is this pre-social individual standing outside of society deciding whether to

enter into social life? For the purposes of Taylor and MacIntyre's genealogies the

individual is that conceived of by liberals and described in the previous chapter. This

individual with his constitutive basket of rights and immunities places primary

importance on the unimpeded exercise of his autonomy and it is within the context of this

autonomy that he defines his relation to society. MacIntyre sees this individual described

in Kierkegaard's *Enten Eller*, Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* and Henry James' *The*

Portrait of a Lady . In all three of these works MacIntyre sees liberal theory drawing

itself out in literary characters defined by their exploration of individual autonomy within

a community. MacIntyre argues that these books offer a liberal archetype that is part of a

larger philosophical tradition.

> The unifying preoccupation of that tradition is the condition of those who
>
> see in the social world nothing but a meeting place for individual wills,
>
> each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand that
>
> world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction,

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[67] Ibid.,

[68] Ibid.,

who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom.[69]

Where before the seventeenth century community was seen as defining and locating the individual in relation to others it is now seen along with other things in the world as either the locus of an opportunity for satisfaction or as an impediment to that satisfaction. Crucially community is now conceived of as a good or perhaps at best a means to acquiring something for the individual.

This is, as Taylor and MacIntyre both argue, how the modern individual is encouraged to conceive of community. No longer is it to be seen as the source of identity, but instead as a source of fulfillment for the already pre-socially formed individual. Even liberals who aspire to conceiving of community differently acknowledge that liberalism seems to imply this. Amy Gutmann, a liberal critic of much communitarian thought, acknowledges that while we may value the things that communitarians espouse liberals do not and cannot insist on them

> We can see the extent to which our moral vision already relies on communitarian values by imagining a society in which no one does more or less than respect everyone else's liberal rights. People do not form ties of love and friendship (or they do so only insofar as necessary for developing the kind of character that respects liberal rights). They do not join neighborhood associations, political parties, trade unions, civic

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[69] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 25

groups, synagogues, or churches. This might be a perfectly liberal, arguably even a just society, but it is certainly not the best society to which we can aspire.[70]

Taylor and MacIntyre reject Gutmann's picture of an empty society of self fulfillers not because we can, as Gutmann argues, aspire to much fuller social relations, but rather because such a society is at worst an existential impossibility. At best, according to Taylor and MacIntyre, a contractual or prudential understanding of community affiliations profoundly misapprehends the primary significance of such affiliations and that misapprehension undermines their actual importance. They contend that people cannot live as Gutmann describes and long remain recognizable as persons. Liberalism by positing even the possibility of a pre-social and fundamentally strategic self not only undermines actual community but conceives of the nature of our communal and intimate relations incorrectly.

MacIntyre and Taylor's Conception of Community

To illustrate their point both MacIntyre and Taylor turn to what they understand to be the pre-modern self, to the understanding of social relations they assert existed before Grotius and others posited the possibility of an individual ontogenetically prior to community. To draw out the contours of the pre-modern self MacIntyre draws not from

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[70] Amy Gutmann, " Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," in <u>Communitarianism a New Public Ethics</u>, ed., Markate Daly, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Inc., 1994) p. 95

our actual history but from our literary history. MacIntyre turns to *The Iliad*[71] and

asserts that it is representative of an understanding of individual social and moral

existence that is not divided between an inward life of the self and a social life. One's

moral life and social life formed a relatively seamless fabric. Like the member of a tribe,

family or class referred to in the last chapter the characters in the *Iliad* have their moral

stances and social interactions informed by their place in a cultural context. Achilles acts

towards Hector in a way appropriate to his place in the Hellenic world, he sees his

actions as justified or shameful on the basis of what one in his position ought to do. To

return again to a theme from the last chapter, what Achilles ought to do is informed by

who Achilles sees himself to be. The culture informs the actions of its members. As

MacIntyre argues

> ...there is nothing to be made of the question: for what purposes do the
>
> characters in the *Iliad* observe the rules that they observe and honour the
>
> precepts which they honour? It is rather the case that it is only within their
>
> framework of rules and precepts that they are able to frame purposes at
>
> all; ...All questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework
>
> itself therefore cannot be chosen.[72]

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[71] MacIntyre acknowledges the obvious point that the *Iliad* is not a history but uses it instead to illustrate a cultural understanding of social relations regardless of whether it is a literary representation of actual events.

[72] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 126.

For the heroes of *The Iliad* the questions of whether the framework of rules and precepts

in which they finds themselves is one they should consent to is non-sensical. It is only in

a culture which has posited the possibility of a pre-social self and which is captivated by

the individual's quest to maximize his autonomy that such a question arises.

The further question is how the characters in the *Iliad* have their actions so

informed by their context where the modern individual does not? Beyond the notion of a

pre-social and autonomy seeking self MacIntyre sees in liberalism a breakdown of the

connection between moral and social existence. According to MacIntyre this is an

inevitable consequence and almost defining characteristic of modernity brought on by

normative pluralism. In the social world depicted by Homer all the characters both

Greek and Trojan share a common heroic ethic. Moderns, he argues, have no such

common ethic beyond a narrow, shared and primarily political ethic of liberal non-

interference (if such a thing can even be described as an ethic). According to MacIntyre

a seamless fabric between social fact and moral act is only possible in an homogenous

social setting; the modern fact of pluralism and the liberal political project of

accommodating it makes it nigh impossible for one to draw moral conclusions out of

their social location.

Not only do moderns have no such shared ethic with which to inform their actions

but MacIntyre asserts that more than a consequence of increased human migration[73] the

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[73] In the final chapter of this thesis the question of migration is touched on briefly but
what is important in terms of MacIntyre's argument regarding pluralism is that in *After*

impossibility of such an ethic is a philosophical presupposition of modern liberalism, in particular that of John Rawls. According to MacIntyre Rawls' famous formulation of the Veil of Ignorance has as one of its few givens that we will not agree on how we are to act or order the goods of our lives. Of Rawls MacIntyre writes

> Rawls explicitly makes it a presupposition of his view that we must expect to disagree with others about what the good life for man is and must therefore exclude any understanding of it that we may have from our formulation of the principles of justice.[74]

This presupposition shared in different ways by most liberal theorists necessarily excludes a strong social ethic of the sort MacIntyre claims informed much of the ancient world. Liberals acknowledging the necessity of some shared principles in order for society to function at all are left with the task of finding a limited ethic around which to structure social life. This is what Rawls acknowledges in claiming that his conception of justice as fairness is political and not metaphysical, and this is what lies at the heart of the pragmatic liberal accommodation of pluralism.

At this point it may appear that MacIntyre is simply pining for a simpler time. Less friendly critics might suggest that MacIntyre is engaging in dangerous rhetoric about the necessity of some sort of strong sense of *Völk* for individuals to engage in coherent

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Virtue at least. the realities of increased human mobility are treated as secondary to philosophical developments and are left relatively untreated.

[74] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 250.

social interaction and moral agency. It may be responded that a strong sense of

community membership tied to a comprehensive worldview remains possible in liberal

society. Liberal society merely refuses to endorse or impose a single worldview. It is this

claim that liberalism does not impose a worldview that MacIntyre takes umbrage with.

To claims of public impartiality MacIntyre retorts that the political compromise of liberal

society, the insistence on a common shared political ethic, one which does not hinder

private comprehensive worldviews, inevitably means that in a plural society such an ethic

must be devoid of real substance that can inform action. Furthermore MacIntyre

contends that this shallow political ethic inevitably infects all other aspects of our social

existence and the metaphysical wilts in the face of the political. For MacIntyre even

strong traditional communities that find themselves in a liberal and plural society

inevitably lose the richness and vitality of their ethics. He asserts that when such groups

enter the public space rather than simply holding their metaphysical beliefs outside of

public discourse the public discourse invades their traditions robbing them of their

vitality. MacIntyre claims

> Even however in such communities the need to enter into public debate
>
> enforces participation in the cultural *melange* in the search for a common
>
> stock of concepts and norms which all may employ and to which all may
>
> appeal . Consequently the allegiance of such marginal communities to the
>
> tradition is constantly in danger of being eroded[75]

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[75] MacIntyre, <u>Virtue</u>, p. 252.

Liberals of course would argue, at the extreme (ie: Kukathas) that if these communities

traditions are being eroded they are only being so eroded because their members are

exercising their right to choose goods other than membership in community. To this

MacIntyre's response, illuminated by his Homeric example, is that by moving from a

richer tradition to the denuded and deracinated political tradition of liberalism

individuals are moving to a tradition unable to inform and make sense of their actions.

What liberals are losing is not a specific, perhaps quaint, worldview but rather the

context essential to making sense of their lives. According to Mulhall and Swift, it is

liberalism's blindness to this vital role of a tradition and a vital community that

MacIntyre sees as its main shortcoming as a social theory. They argue that

> MacIntyre's view is that liberalism is a reflection in politics of the general
> modern inability to perceive that every human good or end (whether
> communal in content or not) has its *origin* in social matrices-that all
> human goods derive from a framework of overlapping communal
> practices and traditions.[76]

As we will see with Taylor as well there is a careful situating of community, a

recognition that there is a sense in which it is a good but it is also and perhaps most

importantly a means, that is, a necessary condition for the very existence of goods and the

source of our ability to discriminate among rival goods.

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[76] Mulhall and Swift, Liberals, p. 94.

Taylor picks up MacIntyre's argument but draws out a different point of difficulty with liberal theory relationship to community and the individual. Taylor is not concerned so much with the presumption of pluralism but with exploring how liberals understand the modern's mode of reasoning about moral and political questions. Taylor asserts that liberals have focused too much on the solitary modes of resolving these questions. He contends that liberal theory offers a view of our adult identity that focuses unduly on individual's potential to be solitary choosers and ignores the myriad ways that we come to conclusions about difficult questions in concert with others as a result of our deep embeddedness in community. He begins by arguing that the character of our selfhood has always been double faceted. On one hand, we have our existence as it is defined by the choices and commitments we make as adults apparently independently; on the other hand, we have these selfsame positions strongly developed and elucidated by our membership in a given community.

> The full definition of someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community....I spoke of identifying oneself as a Catholic or an anarchist, or as an Armenian or a Quebecois.[77]

Of course even Taylor's view of identity seems to leave out a great deal. Beyond stances we take and affiliations in which we belong there exist a host of other factors that define our identity. From influences as mundane as places we visit and things we see to, on a

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[77] Taylor, Sources, p. 36.

much more profound level, the losses and injuries which we inevitably suffer over the course of a life, a plethora of factors shape who we become.

In the last chapter Taylor's claim that community forms identity was developed at some length. What may have been occluded from view was the continuing role that Taylor sees it playing throughout the course of our lives. Taylor sees in some developments in modern liberalism the beginnings of an admission to the seemingly irrefutable claim that in terms of identity formation one's family and community are important. However, he claims that there remains an ideal of transcendence whereby the individual in a sense overcomes his rootedness in community when determining what course of action to pursue. To illustrate he quotes Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of the Good:*

> How recognizable, how familiar to us is the man so beautifully portrayed
>
> in the *Grundlegung,* who confronted even with Christ turns away to
>
> consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his
>
> own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which
>
> Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free,
>
> independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so
>
> many novels and books of moral philosophy.[78]

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[78] Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of the Good, (London: Routledge Publishing Inc., 1970) p. 80 as quoted in Taylor, Sources, p. 84.

This ideal, Taylor suggests, offers us a model of reasoning about our actions which ignores altogether the ways in which when confronted with genuine dilemmas human beings turn either to their cultural resources or to actual living members of their community in order to resolve them. Taylor's concern here seems not to be that individuals will actually become Kantian heroes who reason in a void but rather that in admiring such a way of reasoning about moral questions they fail to appreciate the important role of significant others. Like MacIntyre, Taylor acknowledges that our actions need to be informed by a strong sense of who we are but he makes the further point that not only do we require this ethic to be given to us in interchange with others as we grow and become adults but that such interchange is necessary throughout our lives.

Taylor argues that liberalism, beyond the "tradition" of leaving home in American culture that was discussed in the first chapter, has a mistaken view of how we relate to our communities. Even the young person who "breaks free" of his community in some way remains in contact and in a sense dialogue with the community even if that dialogue is characterized by disagreement. Liberalism, in its modern and in particular its Kantian forms, offers up instead Murdoch's hero of the *Grundlegung*. This hero, while perhaps gaining the necessary intellectual resources for moral reasoning in childhood surroundings as an adulthood goes it alone, free and independent. Taylor contends

> Modern culture has developed conceptions of individualism which picture
> the human person as, at least potentially, finding his or her own bearings
> within, declaring independence from the webs of interlocution which have

originally formed him/her, or at least neutralizing them. Its as though the

dimension of interlocution were of significance only for the genesis of

individuality, like the training wheels of nursery school, to be left behind

and to play no part in the finished person.[79]

Taylor goes on to argue that this notion of leaving behind or neutralizing our culturally

and communally bounded ideas and beliefs in search of some sort of higher or universal

mode of reasoning and being comes to us from both sides of western intellectual culture.

In Judeo-Christianity we are presented with prophets and apostles who in some sense

wander in the wilderness interacting with truth outside of community. In our

philosophical culture this same example is seen in figures from Socrates to Descartes to

Russell and beyond.[80] What is important for Taylor is that these figures from our history

have become ideals which don't accurately reflect the way we (or they) *actually* reason

through our political and moral questions regardless of whether such an ideal is a

desirable as a way we *ought* to reason through these questions.

Taylor argues that we have to understand our moral and political reasoning as

necessarily occurring within a language and within that language's cultural community.

Our moral language is misunderstood when it is presented like the principles of geometry

which once learned can be applied over and over again without outside consultation with

others throughout our lives. Instead Taylor argues when we reason about serious moral

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[79] Taylor, Sources, p. 36.
[80] Ibid.,

or political questions we almost always turn to the resources of our communities and engage them in dialogue. Taylor asserts that "Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity."[81] These exchanges need not take place necessarily with living persons, it can occur in part with the founding or fundamental texts or cultural artifacts of a community. What is crucial for Taylor is that it is only within the context of a community that we learn a language of discernment. Furthermore we rely on that community throughout our lives to sustain and enrich that language "A language exists and is maintained only within a language community."[82] Inasmuch as the cultural hero of the *Grundlegung* causes us to seek to escape community and stand alone thereby weakening community this bent in modern liberal culture threatens to impoverish, if not ever fully extinguish, our language of moral discernment. Such an impoverishment threatens to render us incapable of moral reasoning . Again I return to the liberal society Amy Gutmann describes, that is one in which affiliations are formed for merely strategic or prudential reasons. A society where individuals affiliations are revocable fails to provide the depth of embeddedness necessary to sustain communal notions of the good and of morality. In a society filled with citizens who lack the necessary social affiliations to reason meaningfully about moral and political questions what would prevail would not be justice or injustice but the

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[81] Ibid.,

[82] Ibid., p. 35.

moral equivalent of white noise. Individuals would not act rightly or wrongly. Instead individuals in such a society would *just act* unable to discern the moral significance of one choice versus another.

All of this is not to say that the reasoning that occurs within a community must always resolve questions of community and/or the individual in favour of the community. As Mulhall and Swift read Taylor's argument

> if people are self interpreting animals, they need not give most importance
>
> to conceptions of the good whose content is strongly communal, but their
>
> self-interpretation must be able to acknowledge the necessarily social
>
> origin of any and all of their conceptions of the good and so of
>
> themselves.[83]

What Mulhall and Swift capture here is the way in which Taylor's understanding of community (the same can be said for MacIntyre) straddles two categories. Community, meaning a social group able to sustain and develop a way of life and a system of values, is clearly both a good to be chosen among others and also the means through which we become able to reason about different goods. As a result while the social origin of our moral decisions need not demand that our answers always favour community nonetheless if they *never* favour community then a necessary condition for *all* our decisions is jeopardized. It is the charge of both Taylor and MacIntyre that liberal theory and culture

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[83]Mulhall and Swift, Liberals, p. 112.

either by dint of its presumption of pluralism (MacIntyre) or its commitment to an inappropriate ideal of solitary moral reasoning (Taylor) tends to do just this.

It is important to note that while both Taylor and MacIntyre feel that community plays a vital role in maintaining our ability to reason morally and politically they do not subscribe to the view that we must simply take what our community has as its beliefs and accept them as they are. Both Taylor and MacIntyre argue that a tradition or community only remains vital as long as it is the source not only of affirmation but also conflict and compromise, that when its beliefs become reified it rapidly ceases to be capable of serving the purposes that Taylor and MacIntyre envisage for it. As MacIntyre asserts

> For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode
> of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of
> what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is a true of modern
> physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order
> it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the
> pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.[84]

For both Taylor and MacIntyre community does not serve its vital purpose when it is conceived as a set of beliefs to be honoured, obeyed and never revised. To the contrary, MacIntyre asserts that traditions and communities "when vital, embody continuities of conflict." He goes on to suggest that "...when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always

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[84] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 222.

dying or dead."[85]   The charge that communitarian thought leads to parochialism or a

dogmatic adherence to "tradition" seems at least for MacIntyre and Taylor to be

somewhat out of place.

Taylor and MacIntyre see in liberal theory and culture different threats to the

community that they perceive as vital to moral agency. For Taylor the threat lies in a

liberal notion of community as something which must be transcended in order to live in

some sort of universal space of moral reasoning in which cultural affiliations and

significant others have been neutralized. In MacIntyre the threat lies in the assumption of

cultural pluralism that lies at the heart of modern liberalism and in particular the

influential thought of liberal philosophers such as Rawls and Dworkin.

Liberal Community and Political Liberty

For Taylor and MacIntyre much of modern liberalism, as has been illustrated, adopts a

relation to community as one good among many that may be chosen and in so doing

underestimates its vital role in sustaining the individual's ability to choose at all.

However, both philosophers also see liberal theory and practice in its atomistic

understanding of the individual as having dire consequences for political community and

political liberty. For both thinkers a social philosophy that focuses so strongly on the

individual cannot hope to sustain the institutions of community upon which the

individual depends. As we will see, their political concerns have their foundations in the

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[85] Ibid., This understanding of Burke is perhaps less than entirely accurate, however
beyond the questionable definition of *Burkean* the argument that a tradition that has
settled into dogmatism and reiteration of cant is one that is dying holds.

same respective difficulties that they perceive as the source of their concerns for the individual.

In an earlier section of *After Virtue* already discussed MacIntyre draws out of Homer's *Iliad* an example of how a strong social context founds and sustains the individual sense of identity and informs his moral choices. In his discussion of the political risks of liberal pluralism MacIntyre draws on a different example, that of the Roman *imperium*. According to MacIntyre, the fall of the Roman empire, while perhaps being causally overdetermined, had as one strong element the absence of a unifying cultural community. As the empire became more pluralistic with the influx of peoples from Asia Minor and Western Europe it became more and more a social order based on legal and political precepts and less and less a community founded on a shared social ethic, history and strong sense of cultural membership. As Rome came under a military threat from outside those who lived within the social order felt less that they were protecting a community and set of shared values and more that they were simply reinforcing a series of legal institutions and arrangements. As a result, MacIntyre argues

> A crucial turning point in the earlier history [before the fall of Rome and the ensuing *Dark Ages*] occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of the *imperium*.[86]

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[86] Ibid., p. 263.

What MacIntyre boldly, or perhaps recklessly, asserts is that liberalism as theory and practice has brought us to a similar point in our own time. For MacIntyre liberalism's focus on the individual and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, on neutrality has resulted in a similar failure of individuals to strongly identify with their institutions as elements of their common communal life. MacIntyre posits that the liberal insistence on a pluralist social ethos, which is necessarily constrained in its content to legal arrangements, designed to *manage* society has undermined the necessary sense of identification with our community to the point that its institutions cannot sustain themselves. He asserts that

> In any society where government does not express or represent the moral
> community of the citizens but is instead a set of institutional arrangements
> for imposing a bureaucratized unity on a society which lacks genuine
> moral consensus the nature of political obligation becomes systematically
> unclear.[87]

The nature of political obligation becomes most unclear when it comes to the civic virtue of patriotism. As with the Roman *imperium* MacIntyre sees in modern liberal and pluralist societies a lack of that near seamless web between moral and social fact that allows the member of a community to envisage a threat to his institutions as simultaneously a threat to himself. For the individual rooted in a community premised

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[87] Ibid., p. 254.

on a strong moral consensus an attack on the institutions of that community was an attack

on his way of life, sense of self and the moral sources that inform his actions. For the

liberal citizen of late modernity such an attack may represent an attack on institutions of

which he has become fond, even come to rely upon, but hardly an attack on his moral

sources.

MacIntyre's example is illuminative of his thought on the question of liberal

community not only by way of descriptive comparison but also in the form of predictive

analogy. As with the fall of Rome MacIntyre sees liberal society slipping already into a

new as yet not fully comprehended dark age. For MacIntyre the social reality of liberal

practice in late modernity leaves no option but retreat. He invokes the legacy of St.

Benedict and the monastic orders who sustained European knowledge during the

European dark ages and suggests a similar rear guard action for those still committed to a

substantive moral and social worldview beyond the empty pragmatism he sees in liberal

theory and practice. To those who feel likewise MacIntyre calls out

> What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community
>
> within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained
>
> through the new dark ages which are already upon us...We are not waiting
>
> for a Godot, but for another -doubtless very different-St. Benedict.[88]

This bleak outlook, very different in tone from Taylor's, is one of the points of major

difference between the two philosophers which will be specifically attended to in the

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[88] Ibid., p. 263.

fourth chapter of this thesis. It seems that for MacIntyre, *After Virtue* takes the form not so much of a lament, but of a raging against the inevitable dying of the light of genuine social and moral community.

For Taylor also there are very real concerns about the political future of liberal society that arise out of its conception of the role of community and its relation to the individual. For Taylor the difficulty with liberal community arises not so much out of the reality of increased pluralism in society as it does out of the increased focus on negative liberty and the emphasis on the individual as a private citizen.

To understand Taylor's critique it is useful to once again recall Gutmann's notion of a society that utilizes social unions and community resources only inasmuch as they are, in some easily comprehensible way, beneficial to the individual. Such an individual as Gutmann describes and Taylor opposes, one who views his social commitments as at any time revocable and therefore impermanent, lacks what Taylor sees as the necessary depth of commitment that political community needs in order to sustain itself. Taylor asserts that

> in a world of changing affiliations and relationships, the loss of substance, the increasing thinness of ties and the shallowness of the things we use, increases apace. And the public consequences are even more direct. A society of self-fulfillers, whose affiliations are more and more seen as

revocable, cannot sustain the strong identification with the political community which public freedom needs.[89]

What Taylor sees in late liberal society, especially as a result of its understanding of community as an option, a good among others, is an unwillingness to commit to it as a pearl of great price perhaps worthy of self-sacrifice to protect. Here there is a clear sympathy with MacIntyre, when community is placed alongside other goods and comprehended primarily in terms of self-fulfillment it seems to make little sense to be willing to risk one's life for it (The obvious reasoning being that it is impossible to enjoy **any** goods once one has died in the defense of one.). Of course it seems unlikely that this claim would hold in terms of family and those closest to us, individuals may be unwilling to die in the defense of a way of life but still remain willing to die in defense of those with whom one lives.

Taylor is exploring the political consequences of the claim, discussed earlier, that liberalism impoverishes our commitments to others. When we cease to see community as at one and the same time a valued good and a source of our identities and languages of discernment we may, according to Taylor, turn inward exploring primarily the sources of fulfillment we find in our private lives. Taylor, in *The Malaise of Modernity*, on this subject invokes Alexis de Tocqueville's critique of soft-despotism in liberal democracies

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[89] Taylor, Sources, p. 508.

suggesting that individuals in liberal democracies turn inward to the " 'petits and

vulgaires plaisirs' that people tend to seek in the democratic age."[90]

For Taylor the threat, as we have already seen, that is posed by liberal theory and

practice arises out of an undervaluing or outright misapprehending of the myriad ways

that the individual derives meaning and guidance from those who surround him. In the

public sphere this undervaluing and misapprehension in the individual leads to a failure

to support those political and social institutions upon which political liberty is founded.

Liberal theory and practice, Taylor asserts, has transformed from a model of how one

should reason about moral and political questions into a comprehensive worldview. A

worldview which conceals how our reasoning is dependent on our community and

significant others that surround us undermines our sense of involvement with others

leading to a political outlook which is blind to the ways that the conclusions we come to

and the courses of action we adopt have consequences for the community. Taylor asserts

that

> Atomism has so befogged our awareness of the connection between act
>
> and consequence in society that the same people who by their mobile and
>
> growth-oriented way of life have greatly increased the tasks of the public
>
> sector are the loudest to protest paying their share of the costs of fulfilling
>
> them.[91]

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[90] Tocqueville, Alexis, *De la Democratie en Amerique*, v.2 quoted in Charles Taylor, The Malaise of Modernity (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1991), p. 3.
[91] Taylor, Sources, pp. 505-506.

Taylor, like MacIntyre, is arguing that liberal democracy encourages ways of thinking

and existing socially which conceal the important role played by social and political

institutions in our lives. However Taylor differs from MacIntyre in arguing that the

difficulty lies not in liberalism's various attempts to formulate a social ethos designed to

accommodate a plural society but rather in its understanding of our relation to *any* social

ethos and political or cultural community. Taylor, as has already been said, draws

heavily on Alexis de Tocqueville to support this thesis. Taylor agrees with MacIntyre

that a political order requires a strong identification of the self with community but

argues that liberalism weakens that link not by accommodating pluralism but by

inculcating an asocial individualism centered on self-fulfillment. According to Taylor,

> a too great interest in self-enrichment is a danger for public liberty, which
>
> demands that we orient ourselves to public life instead of being absorbed
>
> by a preoccupation with individual welfare, which we pursue by merely
>
> instrumental reason.[92]

It is this too great interest in self-enrichment that Taylor sees as an almost inevitable

consequence of liberalism's understanding of the individual as potentially asocial and the

necessary devaluing of community membership this understanding entails. Taylor argues

that a belief that we are members only by choice and that community membership should

be revocable if it ceases to satisfy "dissolves community and divides us from each

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[92] Ibid., p. 414.

other."[93] Nonetheless, Taylor contends, while liberalism may conceal our need for a

strong sense of membership and the important goods that membership provides it cannot

eliminate that need. Liberal theory and practice may conceal and even diminish the way

that community provides us with meaning and informs our existence but it cannot destroy

our longing for such meaning and direction. Taylor sees this longing in the way that

citizens of modern liberal democracies "speak[s] of a loss of resonance, depth, or

richness in our human surroundings, both in the things we use and in the ties which bind

us to others".[94]

    For Taylor the consequences of the liberal devaluing of community go far beyond

a sense of loss of meaning or a longing for a more substantial social existence. Taylor

argues that the liberal view of community, not only encourages a mistaken view of how

the individual relates to community, from a social and political perspective it "cannot

sustain the strong identification with political community which public freedom needs."[95]

In a liberal society, Taylor continues, communal affiliations are viewed as primarily

voluntary associations which the citizens joins or remains in only as long as they are seen

as beneficial. Taylor characterizes this as

> The therapeutic outlook [which] seems to conceive of community on the
>
> model of associations like Parents without Partners, a body which is

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[93] Ibid., p. 500.

[94] Ibid., p. 501.

[95] Ibid., p. 508.

highly useful for its members while they are in a given predicament, but to
which there is no call to feel allegiance once one is no longer in need.[96]

The liberal thus gets the significance of community doubly wrong: First, it is mistakenly
conceived of as impermanent, something to be transcended. Second, our allegiance to it
is seen as contingent on its immediate utility.   In this sense liberalism encourages a
therapeutic view of community while chronically misdiagnosing the condition as
potentially cured when it is in fact chronic.

The risks to political community go farther than simply weakening the sense of
membership. One need look no further than the civic virtue of patriotism. In the context
of Parents without Partners the notion of giving one's life in defense of the group seems
ridiculous. In contrast membership in a political community may mean that one may be
called on to risk one's life in defense of the institutions and mode of life of that society.
When we view our communal affiliations from a voluntarist and crassly utilitarian point
of view, patriotism expressed as the laying down of one's life for another becomes
nonsensical. Indeed from this perspective

nothing is left which can give life a deep and powerful sense of purpose:
there is a loss of passion. Kierkegaard saw "the present age" in these

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[96] Ibid.,

terms; and Nietzche's "last men" are an extreme case of this decline, having no aspiration left in life but a pitiable comfort.[97]

The decline into lives of self-fulfillment in the private sphere and the simultaneous retreat from the public sphere poses a threat to political liberty insofar it fails to provide society with citizens capable of defending the social order that permits a the private life they so crave. The liberal citizen becomes unwilling to sacrifice his private goods in defense of the public goods that ensures make them possible.

Liberalism and Community Reconsidered

In their critiques of liberal community MacIntyre and Taylor offer a picture of liberal theory and practice as aspiring to independence while encouraging social conditions that in the long run may lead to a loss of that independence. For both philosophers liberalism's failure to ensure the continuance of community has at its source a misapprehension of the role of community in the lives of its members. Where they differ is not in the understanding of that role but in what they see as the specific threat to community, beyond this misapprehension, that liberalism poses.

Reading Taylor and MacIntyre on the character of liberal community in theory and practice two fundamental concerns come to mind which have been addressed extensively by those who have responded to the communitarian critique of liberalism. The first is the question of whether the picture of liberalism they have drawn is wholly accurate; the second is whether the picture of community they envisage is wholly or even

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[97] Ibid., p. 500.

partially desirable. Turning first to the question of the accuracy of their depiction of

modern liberal theory's stance on community it seems that the charge of

misrepresentation can be compellingly forwarded against both Taylor and MacIntyre's

depiction of the liberal conception of the individual's relation to community. To begin

we need only turn to Allan Buchanan's remarks at the outset of this chapter, they point to

an increasing movement among modern liberal theorists away from notions of rights as

absolutes or 'trumps' and towards a recognition that on occasion the interests of the

community may take precedence over those of specific individual. Confronting Taylor

on this point Quentin Skinner writes

> Consider first his [Taylor's] contention that 'we' regard individual rights
>
> as the cornerstones of political debate. This surely underestimates the
>
> extent to which political theorists of impeccably liberal credentials have
>
> lately begun to express the fear that if we continue to insist on our rights
>
> as political 'trumps' we may serve to impoverish rather than maximize our
>
> individual liberties.[98]

Skinner argues that Taylor's contention that liberals view rights as non-negotiable even

in the face of community values and concerns overlooks the substantial and compelling

arguments of liberal feminists and others regarding the effects of pornography on

individuals and communities. These critiques in particular have focussed on the liberal

assertion that a right ends where it impinges on another's rights. One can see how this

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[98] Quentin Skinner, "Ambiguities of the Modern Self," Inquiry, 34 (1991): 139.

distinction can be used to limit the expression of hateful sentiments when they serve to silence, demean or intimidate in a way that infringes on another's liberty. Liberals such as Will Kymlicka have also argued compelling, and from specifically liberal premises, the very point Taylor is arguing about the relevance of a moral community to the sustaining of its citizen's moral and social lives. While there certainly exists a strong stream of liberalism personified by the likes of Nozick and more recently Chandran Kukathas that refuses to accommodate the concerns of community if it is to the detriment of individual liberty it seems an ungenerous picture to suggest this of all liberals.

A second concern in regards to the question of Taylor and MacIntyre's depiction of liberal community seems to lie in the consequences they foresee from viewing communal association as voluntary. For both thinkers to view the individual as potentially existing prior to or exiting a given historical community implies that liberals believe it possible to for the individual (recognizable as such) to exist outside of a social context. It is questionable whether any liberal has ever actually held this position. Liberal writers, most famously Hobbes and Locke, who write of a 'state of nature' can perhaps be best understood not as describing an actual moment in human history but as proposing a way of thinking about the individual and its relation to society and political authority. More recently John Rawls famous formulations of the Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance are clearly meant to be understood as thought experiments meant to illuminate principles of justice and not propositions about our actual modes of existence. So what is the modern liberal position on community, is it the Kantian hero of the

Grundlegung? This seems unlikely. Modern liberals seem to be moving towards a view

of the individual not as asocial but as potentially differently social. Michael Walzer has

argued that even in the most plural and rights focused liberal society our first associations

are experienced as fundamentally unchosen. I am born into a community and taught a

language of discernment long before I can formulate the question "Is this a community of

which I wish to be a part?" Liberalism acknowledges this relatively obvious fact, where

it parts with Taylor and MacIntyre is in arguing that

> Liberalism is distinguished less by the freedom to form groups on the
>
> basis of these identities than the freedom to leave the groups and
>
> sometimes even the identities behind Association is always at risk in a
>
> liberal society. The boundaries of the group are not policed;[99]

However the freedom to leave does not equate with a turning away from all association,

it means turning away from one given identity or community. Liberals wish to argue that

we may move between communities, perhaps even between identities, not that we can

become culturally neutral, morally and socially featureless individuals moving untouched

through social space. To argue so is to ignore what seems to be a near universal

characteristic of human existence, as Walzer describes it

> It is the very nature of a human society that individuals bred within it will
>
> find themselves caught up in patterns of relationship, networks of power,
>
> and communities of meaning. That quality of being being caught up is

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[99] Walzer, "Communitarian Critique" :15-16.

what makes them persons of a certain sort. And only then can they make

themselves persons of a (marginally) different sort by reflecting on what

they are and by acting in more or less distinctive ways within the patterns,

networks, and communities that are willy-nilly theirs.[100]

What Taylor and MacIntyre can argue against, according to Walzer, is the way that

liberalism misapprehends the social reality of our communal existence and the

ontogenetic reality of how we as persons come into being. Liberal philosophers cannot

transform the neo-natal realities. Liberalism may misunderstand but, according to

Walzer at least, it cannot meaningfully mutilate community or its relation to the

individual.

The final charge against Taylor and MacIntyre regarding liberal community is the

charge brought differently by each that liberal community is unable and unwilling to

inculcate an adequate sense of identification between its citizens and their institutions to

sustain those institutions. According to both MacIntyre and Taylor liberalism fails to

inculcate in its citizens a public ethic sufficient to sustain the institutions of the liberal

polity. This seems a particularly contentious claim from at least two perspectives only

one of which will be treated here.[101] Liberalism is, except in its most radically neutral

formulations, committed to a system of civic education intended to foster a genuine and

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[100] Walzer, "Communitarian Critique" : 10.

[101] The subject of a public ethic for the purposes of social discourse will be treated at
greater length in the fourth chapter.

substantive public ethos, it inculcates a broad *political ethic* while deliberately avoiding

encouraging a specific *metaphysical ethic*. The liberal state is no different than the

illiberal state in needing to encourage the civic virtues necessary for its continuance, as

William Galston argues

> Some of the virtues needed to sustain the liberal state are requisites of
>
> every political community: the willingness to fight on behalf of one's
>
> country; the settled disposition to obey the law; and loyalty-the developed
>
> capacity to understand, to accept and to act on the core principles of one's
>
> society. Some of the individual traits are specific to liberal societies-
>
> independence, tolerance, and respect for individual excellences and
>
> accomplishments for example.[102]

The first set of broad civic virtues may and often is in tension with the second

specifically liberal set of values but the contention that the second set must necessarily

undermine the first, or more dramatically that liberals cannot endorse the more general

set seems a stretch. Liberal societies allow the family and local community to exercise a

wide degree of liberty in the education of children but liberalism need not tolerate its

own subversion in order to be truly liberal.

Just as there exists a tension in liberal theory between broader principles

necessary to the continuity of any community and those specific to liberal community

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[102] William Galston, "Civic Education in the Liberal State," in Liberalism and the Moral
Life, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 93.

there exists also a tension between the inculcation of metaphysical values by private

community and the inculcation of broad political values in public education. Amy

Gutmann argues that a liberal education in citizenship means that

> Within the family, parents are free to foster in children deep convictions
>
> to particular ways of life. But by educating children also as future
>
> citizens, the democratic state resists the view that parents are the ultimate
>
> authorities over their children's education.[103]

In a sense Gutmann's arguments respond more to MacIntyre than Taylor. For MacIntyre

pluralism means that only a weak and watered down social ethos is possible in a liberal

state, but by claiming that the state is *entitled*, as Galston and Gutmann both argue, to

raise citizens and not merely non-interferers, they seem to be rejecting his assertion that

liberal contains in its commitment to pluralism the seeds of its own subversion.

MacIntyre's remarks in particular seem to suggest that any commitment to normative

pluralism must necessarily imply the absence of an adequate social ethos. MacIntyre

polemicizes late in *After Virtue* that

> Where once the common language of morality, even in everyday speech,
> had embodied a set of precise distinctions which presupposed a complex
> moral scheme, there comes into being a kind of linguistic *melange* which
> enables very little to be said.[104]

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[103] Amy Gutmann, "Democratic Education," in <u>Liberalism and the Moral Life</u>, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Camridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 71.

[104] MacIntyre, <u>Virtue</u>, p. 233

The liberal arguments put forward by Gutmann and Galston illustrate that this doesn't need to be the case at all. Liberal society through a strong commitment to public and liberal education seems committed to much more than a linguistic *melange* able to articulate very little, instead it seems committed to a strong public ethos with features of civic virtue that extend beyond liberalism as well as those specific to liberalism.

Communitarian Community Reconsidered

Examining MacIntyre's assertion closely reveals a second stream of critique of both writers that has formed an important part of the liberal response to their work. Both writers speak repeatedly of *the past*, defined as a time of strong social ethos and a deep sense of belonging and a comprehension of our place in the cosmos. Both of them long for a time when we were more conscious of the myriad ways in which our existences were defined by community and importantly by the myriad ways that community could and did compellingly delineate our existence. Both include caveats about how we are more free today and that in some important ways this is an improvement but both still seem almost nostalgic for the pre-modern past. It comes up in particular in their respective treatments of patriotism and the desirability of a strong sense of identification with the community and its institutions. The question is: is this really such an unmitigated good? Taylor in his discussion of Herder in *Sources of the Self* describes, almost glowingly,his notion of national identity and culture"Different *Volker* have their own way of being human, and shouldn't betray it by aping others."[105] Taylor goes on to

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[105] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 376.

mention sympathetically that Herder was an anti-colonialist but fails to describe at all the malignant social and political ethos and orders that have arisen out of the Herderian concept of cultural authenticity. In *The Politics of Recognition* Taylor acknowledges that in the Herderian notions of cultural membership and authenticity "We can recognize here the seminal idea of modern nationalism, in both benign and malignant forms"[106]. Taylor offers this brief acknowledgement of the existence of *malignant forms* but fails to consider the tens of millions of human lives lost in this century as a consequence of these forms. A strong sense of belonging may be an important characteristic of the pre-modern world but it has also been an important element of totalitarian regimes in this century. When Taylor and MacIntyre speak of a loss of resonance and feeling of depth, about the impossibility of patriotism, about the absence of a sense of something worth dying for what they miss is its darker side: a strong sense of political and communal identification may result in a sense of something worth killing for. Strong identification of the self with its social affiliations can ground a person and inform his actions, but just as the liberal view may lead to an emptying of this sense of belonging the communitarian leanings of Taylor and MacIntyre can lead to an inappropriate deepening of the sense of belonging where embeddedness transforms into subsumation. What MacIntyre and Taylor seek are individuals who recognize themselves as profoundly dependent on their community. Individuals so conceived *could* be more richly and critically aware of themselves as members but they could also end up dangerously less aware of their

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[106] Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," p. 31.

individuality. While Taylor and MacIntyre both rail against liberalism for its its

atomistic portrayal of the individual they fail to consider the other pole: the individual

who is so embedded in community that his sense of being is understood in an

overconnected way, perhaps as a cog in the machine of the state or cell in the body of the

community. Authenticity and embeddedness seem all too amenable to corrosion into the

subsuming of the self, in this century such subsumed selves have taken the form of

Einsatzgruppen and *The New Marxist Man.*[107]

A turn back towards the community brings with it much greater and immediate

risks to the actual individuals than does any loss of meaning. To be a Sartrean caricature

"condemned to be free" is emminently preferable to being an outsider or dissident

condemned to death. It may be a fair appraisal of the community to describe it as the

source of our identities but if it is not always held as only one facet of our identity the

individual can lose sight of his existence as an independent morally culpable agent. To

over-emphasize our embeddedness and occlude from view our individuality and those

other elements which inform our actions is to risk becoming a monster. We see the

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[107] On this point Jean Bethke Elshtain is particularly illuminating. Elshtain sees embeddedness transformed into sublimation of individuality as lying at the heart of the experience of the soldier in combat. Elshtain writes:
"It is in war that the strength of the state is tested, and only through that test can it be shown whether individuals can overcome 'selfishness' and are prepared to work for the whole and to sacrifice in service to the more inclusive good. The man becomes what he in some sense is meant to be by being absorbed in the larger stream of life: war and the state. To preserve the larger civic body which must be 'as one' , particular bodies must be sacrificed." Jean Bethke Elshtain, " The Risks and Responsibilities of Affirming Ordinary Life,", in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, ed.James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 184.

consequences of such occlusion, and indeed such a monster in Caluccio Salutati's

proclamation that the love of one's community or country means "one must not cavil at

crushing one's brothers or delivering 'from the womb of one's wife the premature child

with the sword.'"[108]

Salutati's exclamation brings us to a second risk that arises out of the strong

valuing of community idealized by Taylor and MacIntyre which is how one deals with

those who would subvert community? Both Taylor and MacIntyre acknowledge that a

community is always a scene of conflict and debate over its values and direction, but that

debate for both of them is intramural in nature, it is always a conflict about what a

community's beliefs mean or how they should be lived. The difficulty arises when one

chooses, as Walzer claims liberalism permits, to leave that community behind. In

modern liberal democracies committed to pluralism this may be an increasingly common

phenomenon, in *Constructing Community* Donald Moon observes that

> Many people will find that their own experiences and identities cannot be
>
> accommodated in terms of traditional ascriptive groupings. This may
>
> result from intermarriage, from their having changed occupations and
>
> ways of life associated with their groups of origin, or form their having
>
> accepted scientific or philosophical orientations incompatible with the
>
> belief systems of traditional groups and so forth.[109]

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[108] Ibid.,

[109] Donald J. Moon., *Constructing Community,* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 184.

Such people who exit community or continue to live within the physical boundaries of the community but cease to sustain the community may be seen, at least by MacIntyre, as a threat to the continued health and coherence of that community's social and moral traditions. By Taylor and MacIntyre's lights such individuals pose a threat to the language of discernment on which a given community's citizens depend. Difference, disagreement and refusal to participate may come to be seen as threatening and the individuals who behave so may be seen as a specific threat. The question then is how does one deal with them? If Walzer is right that communitarian thought is driven by a desire to police the borders of community, could not such an actual policing take place? Arguably Quebec's language and education laws are just such an attempt, and while Taylor has argued elsewhere that this is an acceptable form of policing[110] it is far from unreasonable to suspect that tolerating so-called *benign* forms of cultural policing opens the door for more *malignant* forms. It is here that the wisdom of conceiving of individual rights as somehow non-negotiable seems apparent. While it may undermine the community upon which individuals depend it also serves to defend the individual from that same community.

MacIntyre and Taylor's treatment of community and the liberal response to it seems to create a question of lesser evils. To focus on the individual at the expense of community seems to incur a loss of meaning and a growth of anomie in individual lives.

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[110] Taylor, "Politics of Recognition", p. 61.

On the other hand an over-emphasis on community seems to open up the possibility of tyrannies directed at *the greater good* in which actual individuals may suffer much more immediate and pressing calamity. What the liberal reader of MacIntyre and Taylor may be left with is a suspicion that in terms of the politics of community the cure is worse than the illness but also a deeper appreciation of the gravity of the malaise.

Chapter Three

In chapters one and two Charles Taylor's and Alisdair MacIntyre's respective

conceptions of the relationship of the individual to community were discussed at length.

In treating their views on community and the individual, key differences were brought

out between their understanding of this relationship and the picture offered by certain

influential strands of modern liberal theory and culture. In the two preceding chapters

what became clear was that Taylor and MacIntyre see community as playing a crucial

role in the individual's attempts to 'make sense' of his life. It became clear that Taylor

and MacIntyre (with subtle differences of meaning and terminology) see community as

providing a sort of framework within which individuals can make meaningful choices

about the course of their lives and the dilemmas they are presented with. In this chapter

what will be discussed is the subject of many of those choices: the good.

To begin a discussion of Taylor and MacIntyre's understanding of the role of the

good it will be important to describe what they see as the dominant liberal understanding

of the role of the good and then see how each in turn is critical of that understanding.

Having drawn out what they see as the serious shortcomings of the liberal picture of the

good this chapter will attempt to explain what each sees as the important place of the

good in a human life. Finally some serious questions and concerns about the role of the

good as they conceive of it will be examined, in particular those regarding the

characterization of modern liberalism's treatment of the good and their insistence on the

need for a substantive good as part of a public moral philosophy.

Liberalism, Neutrality and the Good

As has hopefully been amply illustrated in earlier chapters of this thesis both

Taylor and MacIntyre focus their critiques of liberal theory on a particular Anglo-

American and neo-Kantian incarnation of liberal thought that is perhaps most widely

known through the writings of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. As discussed earlier

this vision of liberal thought places primary importance on a specific view of the

individual which sees human dignity as somehow rooted in autonomy. When this view of

liberalism considers the good, as a result of its concern for autonomy, it sees no

possibility of the state or society in general publicly endorsing one good over another. As

Dworkin argues in his essay *Liberalism* : "The first theory of equality supposes that

political decisions must be so far as is possible, independent of any particular conception

of the good life, or what gives value to life."[111]The assumptions that Dworkin is working

under here are two fold, first that autonomy to be genuinely acknowledged and defended

demands equal treatment, second that "the government does not treat them [citizens]as

equals if it prefers one conception [of the good] to another."[112] If this is the case, as

Dworkin and Rawls among others have contended in the past, then what seems to be

demanded of a liberal social ethos is neutrality or at the very least some sort of

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[111] Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in <u>Liberalism and its Critics</u>, ed. Michael Sandel
(New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 64.

[112] Ibid.,

proceduralism. What is not permitted in a liberal moral schema is any strong notion of the good, or as Taylor and MacIntyre will both argue, any real discussion at all of the good.

For Charles Taylor in particular the stripping away of strong notions of the good is one of the major weakness with liberal theory. He argues that its insistence on discussing only what a human is obligated to do and overlooking what it is good to be has led modern liberal theory to develop an *ethics of inarticulacy* . Taylor writes

Impelled by the strongest metaphysical, epistemological, and moral ideas of the modern age these theories narrow our focus to the determinants of action, and then restrict our understanding of these determinants still further by defining practical reason as exclusively procedural. They utterly mystify the priority of the moral by identifying it not with substance but with a form of reasoning, around which they draw a firm boundary.[113]

The consequence of the drawing of this boundary between what may and may not be considered is that the liberal is left able to meaningfully debate only "what it is right to do rather than what it is good to be"[114] Indeed Taylor takes this point so far as to suggest that the neo-Kantian liberals, he names Hare and Rawls in particular, not only leave out a discussion of what it is good to be, but even the very idea that morality should concern itself with such issues. Taylor goes as far as to claim that within the rubric of neo-

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[113] Taylor, Sources, p. 89.

[114] Ibid., p. 79.

Kantian liberal theory the "qualitatively higher, with strong goods, is never even mooted".[115]

Taylor argues that when higher goods are removed from the moral schema of liberalism something must replace them as an object of strong evaluation. For liberalism the object of strong evaluation becomes how one reasons as opposed to the outcome of any specific act of reasoning. This shift, which occurs first in the public sphere particularly in regards to questions of justice is transformed, in particular in the wake of the Enlightenment, into a way of reasoning privately about all moral dilemmas. According to Taylor this represents a massive change in the way that moral reasoning is understood. To illustrate Taylor refers to Plato. Taylor asserts that in Platonic moral reasoning one couldn't be fully rational and yet believe that the best life was one dedicated to bodily pleasure. The act of reasoning was always deeply connected to the outcome of that reasoning. In liberal moral theory, Taylor argues, "By contrast, a procedural notion of reason breaks this connection. The rationality of an agent or his thought is judged by how he thinks, and not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct."[116] For Taylor this is a crucial shortcoming in liberal ethics. He describes such an ethics as not only inarticulate but cramped because it is incapable of countenancing seriously all sorts of modes of life and moral dilemmas that fall outside the purview of what we are obligated to do. Procedural ethics, he argues, can tell us that

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[115] Ibid., p. 84.

[116] Ibid., p. 86

it is right that we respect the rights of others, that human beings *qua* human beings deserve our respect. What procedural ethics cannot do is tell us why human beings are worthy of such respect. To tell us why human beings are worthy of respect is to offer what is a substantive theory of the good for humans.[117] Liberalism is a moral theory that can endorse but not explain its own rule system. Taylor argues that this places the liberal citizen permanently in a position of estrangement from the customs of his community. The liberal, when told to respect others, has a moral theory that can only explain to him what to do and not why. Taylor argues that the liberal relates to rules like a young child or stranger does to the customs of society.

> The child or outsider can be told, what not to do, can be given a description of what to avoid which they can understand before they can understand just what is wrong. We can get a sufficient grasp of the commandment, 'thou shalt not kill' or can obey the order, 'Don't talk like that to Granddad!" before we can grasp articulations about the sanctity of human life, or what is means to respect age.[118]

By refusing to endorse a substantive good what liberalism does is conceal from view, at least in the public sphere, not only what justifies liberal programs but also the very necessity of having a basic and substantive justification for choices.

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[117] What it is that makes us worthy of respect as opposed to why we are obligated to respect is one Taylor returns to often in *Sources of the Self* and which this thesis will treat at greater length in chapter four.

[118] Ibid., p. 80.

The individual who is initiated into a moral theory that understands morality only in the sense of what it is they are obliged to do or to forego lacks the strong motivation to do anything at all. Liberalism cannot provide the powerful motivation or 'calling' to action that is provided by a strong notion of the good. Liberalism cannot help us to decide what to love; it can only manage our affairs. This, Taylor acknowledges, has not been a total loss, the strong sense of substantive good inculcated in earlier societies was not entirely a positive phenomena. In an important caveat early on in *Sources of the Self* Taylor acknowledges that such a strong sense of good could and did place tremendous burdens on individuals. A deep belief in a higher standard invariably does mean substantial burdens. Today however Taylor sees our sources of crisis as radically changed. Unlike the pre-modern who may fail to attain a strongly valued good

> The form of danger here is utterly different from that which threatens the modern seeker, which is something close to the opposite: the world loses altogether its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing , the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body space.[119]

To strip our moral theory of the language of what it is good to be leaving only a series of obligations and proscriptions strips our moral landscape of the directional landmarks one needs in order to decide not only what one may do but what direction one's life should take. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the analogy of space and in a sense even

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[119] Ibid., p. 18.

topography is fundamental to Taylor's explanation of the positive role the good plays in our moral lives.

For MacIntyre, the difficulties posed by liberal theory and culture for our treatment of the good also lie in the absence of any strong notion of the good. In a chapter provocatively entitled "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality had to Fail", MacIntyre traces the roots of our loss of connection to the good back to Kant and through Kant to the neo-Kantians up to and including such present day philosophers as John Rawls. MacIntyre, like Taylor, sees our loss of the good as arising out of the Enlightenment move to focus on "right" reasoning. From Descartes through Kant MacIntyre traces the development of a view of reasoning that focused on the means much more than on the ends. However, MacIntyre acknowledges that Kant took for granted the existence of a teleological triumvirate of God, freedom and happiness. Later nineteenth and twentieth century neo-Kantians saw this teleological presupposition as "an arbitrary and unjustifiable concession to positions which he [Kant] had already rejected."[120]   With this step away from a morality that presupposed a human telos, as Taylor also argues, the character of morality is radically transformed. MacIntyre contends

Kant was right; morality did in the eighteenth century, as a matter of historical

fact, presuppose something very like the teleological scheme of God, freedom and

happiness as the final crown of virtue which Kant propounds. Detach morality

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[120] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 56.

from that framework and you will no longer have morality; or at the very least, you will have radically transformed its character.[121]

MacIntyre, like Taylor, recognizes that any teleology places on those who seriously subscribe to it serious perhaps even unendurable burdens. The emergence of this new, radically transformed morality, procedural and non-teleological in nature, is experienced by the modern self as a liberation from the moral burdens imposed by a demanding and substantive notion of the human good. What the sense of liberation concealed, according to MacIntyre, was a loss which far outweighed the small gain in liberty. He asserts

It passes to some degree unnoticed, for it is celebrated historically for the most part not as a loss, but as a self-congratulatory gain, as the emergence of the individual freed on the one hand from the social bonds of those constraining hierarchies which the modern world rejected at its birth and on the other hand from the social bonds of those constraining hierarchies which the modern world rejected at its birth and the other had from what modernity has taken to be the superstitions of teleology...it is to note that the peculiarly modern self, the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional boundaries provided by a social identity and a view of human life as ordered to a given end.[122]

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[121] Ibid.,

[122] Ibid., p. 34.

What MacIntyre sees as the modern dilemma is not so much the development of a moral

language that is without referent to the good and therefore cramped and inarticulate but

rather a moral language and sense which continues to speak in the language of teleology

but has lost the commitment to the teleology that such language requires in order to be

spoken intelligibly. The neo-Kantians thus continue to use the language of Kant,

continue to endorse and embrace the Kantian mode of existence, but have severed the

connection to the Kantian end of existence, understood in terms of a theistic notion of the

good for and of human beings

Where Taylor described the modern self as being struck by a life disenchanted

without a spiritual contour MacIntyre sees quite a different modern self. This self

continues speaking in a moral language unaware of the disappearance of the moral

landscape that made sense of his statements. To illustrate his point MacIntyre turns to

sacred music and liturgy. He contends that when a Protestant listens to the music of the

baroque Catholic liturgy and "listen[s] to the scripture because of what Bach wrote rather

than because of what St. Matthew wrote, then sacred texts are being preserved in a form

in which the traditional links with belief have been broken".[123] (This example becomes

more apt if one changes the listener to an atheist rather than a Protestant who while

perhaps uninterested in the particular order and cadence of the Catholic liturgy would

still be attending at least in part to St. Matthew). What this example points to as lost is

not merely a crucial distinction between the religious and the aesthetic but also a whole

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[123] Ibid., p. 38.

range of experience that in effect uproots Bach's compositions and strips away crucial

aspects of its meaning. MacIntyre concurs with Taylor that the world has lost some of its

contour. MacIntyre differs with Taylor only in arguing that the loss of contour has gone

unrecognized.

For MacIntyre the setting aside of a strong evaluation of the good has another

crucial consequence: it robs the modern self of a way to justify one decision over another.

As we saw with Taylor, a procedural ethic allows us to discuss what is permitted or

proscribed but cannot tell us what to pursue or to value. For MacIntyre the loss of a

deeply held notion of the good robs us of a justification for our choices. Taylor argues

that when we are told to respect other people's rights, modern and in particular Neo-

Kantian liberalism cannot give us an account of what it is about people that makes them

worthy of respect and therefore entitled to such rights-respecting. MacIntyre in contrast

suggests that the newly liberated self is free to choose but can no longer justify his

choices either to himself or others. Returning again to Kierkegaard's *Enten Eller*

MacIntyre suggests that between the aesthetic life of the seducer and the ethical life no

choice can be made without an antecedent notion of what it is good for the chooser to be.

The person who exists sovereign and free, as the modern self is described by MacIntyre,

must choose his first principles without the benefit of a moral ontology of the human

person. Lacking a moral ontology such first principles must be chosen out of some sort

of 'instinct' or 'predilection'. When one *chooses* a basic reason its sheer 'basicness'

prohibits justification. In the liberal's terrible freedom he is left with a set of beliefs

which he can, were he too closely examine them, never deeply hold due to their groundlessness.

Both Taylor and MacIntyre depict the liberal self as in the grips of a crisis. They see the individual as being put at sea and both view the new liberties that the dismantling of strong social orders heralded as a tremendously disorientating phenomenon. Taylor envisions the modern liberal citizen as lost in a morally featureless landscape unable to discern which direction to strike out in. MacIntyre, inspired by Kierkegaard, sees us standing at a crossroads unable to seriously and meaningfully defend the choice of either route.

Taylor and MacIntyre on the Role of the Good.

Having briefly discussed what Taylor and MacIntyre see as liberal theory's failure to engage or recognize the importance of the good it is appropriate to now turn to what each in turn sees as the significance of a strong notion of the good in a given individual's life. For both philosophers what the good does and what liberalism by eschewing a strong public notion thereof cannot do, is allow people to make sense of their lives. For Taylor, who is perhaps the clearer of the two on this question, the good is understood as enabling us to orientate ourselves in moral space and to order those things which we value. For MacIntyre, the good plays a different role which is in a sense two-fold. Like Taylor he sees it as allowing us to make sense of our lives but it also, he contends, allows for the possibility of virtue . What the two share is a belief that without a strong sense of,

and allegiance to, a conception of the good, the possibility of genuine moral agency evaporates.

Taylor, as his treatment of identity and community illustrated, conceives of the role of morality in terms of a framework within which, and only within which, an individual is able to discern what questions and choices are relevant to his life. Fundamentally many of these questions are about what it is good for that individual to be. To explain this framework Taylor returns over and over to the analogy of physical space. He argues that we orientate ourselves in *moral space* through the landmarks of our moral framework (i.e.: for the Christian perhaps the idea of the salvation of the soul or some deep valuing of charity regarding the poor) in a way just as essential to our existence as our orientation in physical space. Taylor asserts

> We couldn't conceive of a human life form where one day people came to
> reflect that, since they were spatial beings, they ought after all to develop
> a sense of up and down, right and left, and find landmarks which would
> enable them to get around-reflections which might be disputed by
> others.[124]

For Taylor the human condition of experiencing the physical world spatially is if not identical at least analogous to a claim that we experience the noumenal world morally. We exist in a field of moral questions. Within that field our moral framework is essential in allowing us to move across and even to grasp the terrain. Without such a framework,

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[124] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 31.

Taylor asserts, "a person wouldn't know where he stood on issues of fundamental importance, would have no orientation in these issues whatever, wouldn't be able to answer for himself on them."[125] This is all familiar. it formed a crucial element of Taylor's treatment of identity, what is relevant for this chapter is how it relates to the good.

Taylor sees the good as playing two important roles in an individual's life, first it allows an individual to measure his life in terms of progress towards a good and second it allows us to order the rival goods with which we are inevitably presented. The first role of the good is most clearly illustrated by Taylor's spatial analogy. Goods, Taylor argues are the landmarks on our moral horizon. As such, goods serve to orientate us in moral space, to allow us to answer the question "How is my life going?" Taylor argues that this is a fundamentally modern question and one that reflects a fundamental need of individuals to place themselves in relation to the good. A moral framework, Taylor argues, serves as a map of the area in which we may move and it is only by sighting the various landmarks on that map with our own eyes that we can understand where we are. Taylor asserts that "our orientation in relation to the good requires not only some framework(s) which defines the shape of the qualitatively higher but also a sense of where we stand in relation to this". For Taylor this question is not neutral. An individual may not orientate himself to the good, discover he is at a great distance from it and having so situated himself be content regardless of his distance from the good. For

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[125] Ibid.,

Taylor an orientation in relation to the good is always an orientation toward the good

coupled with a longing to be closer to it. In the first chapter we saw how Taylor

conceives of identity as characterized by a lifelong sense of becoming. This becoming is

fundamentally a becoming towards the good. Taylor asserts , "we come here to one of

the most basic aspirations of human beings, the need to be connected to, or in contact

with, what they sees as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental value."[126] Any

sense of becoming or longing for a fuller existence is characterized in part by this longing

to be closer to something one sees as of great value to one's life. In our ordinary

existence this sense of longing may be left only at the most nascent level especially when

what it is that is highly valued are the goods of an 'ordinary' life. Such goods as being a

good father, husband, member of the community may never emerge into one's

consciousness fully, but Taylor argues this reflects not a lack of orientation towards them

and longing to be connected to them but rather that such an orientation and longing have

gone particularly well. The sense of longing to be connected becomes explicit only

when it doesn't appear to be going well or when the distance to travel seems particularly

great due to one's own failures or the particularly lofty nature of the good strongly

valued. To illustrate Taylor turns to the example of St. Francis of Assisi:

> When St. Francis left his companions and family and the life of a rich and
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> popular young man in Assisi, he must have felt in his own terms the

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[126] Ibid., p. 42.

insubstantiality of that life and have been looking for something full,

wholer, to give himself more integrally to God, without stint.[127]

By Taylor's lights at least, St. Francis's orientation to the good came into question

because it was in jeopardy. The feeling of a lack of fullness or a failure to connect with

what one values highly makes the longing for the good explicit. Where the longing for

connectedness is satisfied or at least implicitly perceived to be going well it remains

under the surface but is nonetheless a crucial part of our identities.

According to Taylor, the highly valued good serves the purpose of orientating our

lives, giving them a sense of progress and becoming; but the most highly valued good

also performs another crucial function. The ultimate good in a person's life Taylor refers

to as the "hypergood." This hypergood while allowing us to orientate ourselves and

direct our lives also allows us to order all the other goods in our lives. Hypergoods,

Taylor asserts, are those "goods which not only are incomparably more important than

others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided

about."[128] To return to St. Francis as an example we can see how the hypergood that he

saw as God, or perhaps the love of God allowed him to order all the other goods of his

life. The goods of a gentleman of Assisi were judged, weighed and ultimately set aside

in light of this hypergood. For Taylor it is the hypergood of an individual life, and not as

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[127] Ibid., p. 43.

[128] Ibid., p. 63.

liberal theory would have it the rules and obligations one obeys, which are the real

foundation of our moral distinctions. He argues that the special role of hypergoods

means "that we all recognize some such[hypergoods]; that this status is just what defines

the 'moral' in our culture: a set of ends or demands which not only have unique

importance but also override and allow us to judge others."[129] Hypergoods, for Taylor,

do not simply settle the issue of orientation and direction of one's life for the individual.

Such goods, like ordinary goods, may fail to endure a lifetime being superseded by a new

hypergood. When this happens the old hypergood is seen in the new light of the new

hypergood thereby justifying the move from one to the other. This shift

> radically alters our view of their value, in some case taking what was
>
> previously an ideal and branding it a temptation. Such was the fate of the
>
> warrior honour ethic at the hands of Plato, and later of Augustine, and
>
> later still in the eyes of the modern ethic of ordinary life.[130]

What is important here is not that a hypergood may be superseded by another but that it

must be replaced by another. It may not simply be discarded altogether. Life without

any hypergood whatsoever would connote a profound sense of moral disorientation.

According to Taylor's argument an individual without a hypergood would be lost at sea,

unable to either measure and evaluate the sum of his life to date or to deliberate

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[129] Ibid.,

[130] Ibid., p. 64.

meaningfully about the order which goods in his life should take and which should be pursued or foregone. The challenge to liberalism in Taylor's argument is this: Does it encourage this disorientation? While modern liberalism lists what one is obliged to do it gives no hint as to what one should seek and in so seeking how one should order one's existence. This is what Taylor describes early on in *Sources of the Self* as the risk facing the modern seeker that their social ethos is insufficient to orientate them or give any hint of what they should long to be connected to.

Alisdair MacIntyre's treatment of the good differs greatly from Taylor's but in the end the two have much in common. MacIntyre, as was argued earlier, agrees with Taylor that modern liberal theory strips away crucial elements of our moral lives but his understanding, or at least explanation of, what it is that liberal theory misses differs greatly from Taylor. For MacIntyre what liberal theory misses are the roles played by *practice,* and *tradition* in an individual's life.

For MacIntyre a practice is the only context in which any goods or excellences of the human person can be realized. MacIntyre describes a practice in this way:

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.[131]

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[131] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 186.

To illustrate what MacIntyre means by a practice, consider the practice of farming. The good of farming is, at least in part, the production of food. Some of the excellences of farming, while not exclusive to farming, are constancy, industry, and attentiveness. The important thing here is that what makes the good of farming possible is its excellences. Without at least industry, constancy and attentiveness one cannot hope to produce the good of farming. But the significance runs deeper. It is only within the context of the practice of farming that an individual can be evaluated as either a good or a bad farmer. Without an idea of what the outcome of farming should be and what excellences of the person it requires an evaluation of other's as farmers or even self-evaluation becomes impossible.

MacIntyre places all practices within the larger context of a tradition. According to MacIntyre it is a tradition which determines which practices will be pursued and how the excellences of those practices will be evaluated.

> What the good life is for a fifth century Athenian general will not be the same as what it was for a medieval nun or a seventeenth century farmer. But it is not just that different individuals live in different social circumstances; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity.[132]

According to MacIntyre a tradition is a set of practices and their attached excellences which, as Mulhall and Swift explain with great clarity, constitute "a mode of

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[132] MacIntyre, <u>Virtue</u>, p. 220.

understanding their importance and worth; it is the medium by which such practices are shaped and transmitted across generations"[133] A tradition for MacIntyre informs an individual's decisions about what practices to pursue and how to so pursue.

MacIntyre's treatment of *practice* and *tradition* may seem on the surface to belong in the chapters concerned with community or identity but to say that misses the crux of MacIntyre's argument. A *tradition* is determinative of which *practices* the individual should pursue and these make possible an evaluation of the person. MacIntyre rejects entirely the possibility of evaluating the individual *qua* individual; we always evaluate them in the context of their performance of a variety of culturally determined *practices*. For Taylor it was our orientation to the good, or moral distance from it, that allowed us to measure the progress of our lives. For MacIntyre it is evaluating our success or failure at achieving the goods and excellences of a given set of practices that serves this function. A farmer can only be a good farmer if he succeeds in acquiring the excellences of farming and achieving the goods of farming. On a more morally relevant level the idea of a religious practice means that viewing Christianity as a practice means considering first the goods of Christianity, primarily salvation and the practice of genuine virtue, which can be realized only through acquiring the excellences necessary to that life: faith, hope and love. But moreover, it is by the standards of Christianity alone that a Christian can judge his success or failure. To return to MacIntyre's concerns with the neo-Kantians we can see how a practice stripped of goods cannot encourage excellences

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[133] Mulhall and Swift, <u>Liberals</u>, p. 90.

directed at achieving said goods, nor can success or failure be measured except in the
most basic evaluation of ability to follow rules. Here chess is illustrative: if the only
form of evaluation open is success or failure in obedience to rules then it becomes
impossible to distinguish the chess play of a novice from that of a grand-master. Both the
novice and the grand-master are acquainted with and obey the rules equally well. If we
don't consider the good of victory and the strategic excellences necessary to achieving it
the one becomes indistinguishable from the other. Furthermore, in the absence of a
consideration of the good of chess we cannot draw meaningful distinctions between the
individual who plays the game for the love of it, reveling in its infinite subtleties and
variations and the individual who uses chess solely as a means, say to impress his peers
or to win prizes and prestige in competition. On a more morally significant level we can
see how the 'true' believer in a given faith would live a life characterized by the virtues
specific to that faith out of a profound love of God whereas a 'false' believer might
perform these very same virtues in order to gain respect or advantage in his community.

To return to the argument from earlier in the chapter then, when the Neo-Kantians
break the connection between how we reason and the outcome of reasoning they sever
the connection that makes evaluation possible. The liberal, when he endorses no
conception of the good life for human beings beyond the necessary social obligations and
proscriptions necessary for civil life endorses a civic practice which cannot distinguish
between the life lived well and that lived poorly, except in terms of obedience to the laws
of that society. If one takes seriously MacIntyre's claim that the civil culture of

liberalism inevitably bleeds into all other aspects of our lives then one is left with a civic turned general ethos in which we cannot distinguish between modes of existence in any meaningful way.

For MacIntyre this not only prevents us from evaluating our lives it prevents us from bringing them to completion, of living out what he describes as the "narrative unity" of a human life. To live one's life as a single story one must ask "What is the good for me?... and bring it to completion."[134] To bring the practice of farming to completion is to realize the goods of farming, to bring a life to completion is to realize what one considers the goods of a life to be. Without a conception of the good towards which to strive the possibility of living out one's life, of bringing it to completion becomes incoherent. In a very real sense a life without a strong telos must necessarily lack a point or purpose beyond playing by the rules and putting time on the clock.

For both Taylor and MacIntyre the idea of a life being coherent or in any way directed or capable of progress and growth is entirely predicated on a strong and substantive notion of the good. While each understands the place of the good in different ways what remains clear is that both see the good as the way in which we track our lives. Importantly, they both concur that such tracking is something that all humans feel a need to do, that to make sense of our existence demands it. Liberal theory then, by attempting to become procedural and not substantive, fails to address a fundamental need of humans. It cannot 'make sense of our lives'. This is one of the most critical and

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[134] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 218.

compelling aspects of the communitarian challenge to liberal theory and in the last

portion of this chapter I will turn to three possible liberal responses to Taylor and

MacIntyre's charge.

Taylor, MacIntyre and the Good Reconsidered

The first response to Taylor and MacIntyre's concerns, one that has been heard

before, is that they are arguing against a form of liberalism that is not reflective of the

theory as a whole. Liberal theory, perhaps more than any other is a constantly

transforming itself, it is a self-redefining political theory. In response to critiques of

liberal neutrality offered by MacIntyre and Taylor, among others, liberals are increasingly

retreating from political neutrality as a fundamental premise of liberalism.[135] In its place

is emerging an acknowledgment of the importance of community goods for individual

rights and such a recognition seems to be predicated on a notion, even if only an implicit

and inchoate notion of the human good. This notion may be nothing more than a

prudential acknowledgment of a human longing to be affiliated with others, to experience

life in part as a member of a community of significant others but it still belies a notion of

an innate human good. Modern, and especially neo-Kantian liberalism, is in part

motivated by a deep belief in universal respect. It is that very respect as captured by

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[135] Andrew Mason points to this in his response to MacIntyre when he asserts that: "Some of those whom we quite justifiably regard as liberals argue that the state should pursue perfectionist policies through subsidies that are designed to protect and promote valuable aspects of community." Andrew Mason, "MacIntyre on Liberalism and itsCritics," in After MacIntyre, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), p. 227.

Dworkin's remarks about equality at the outset of this chapter that prohibits them from speaking of the hypergood that drives them. Taylor writes

> They are caught in a strange pragmatic contradiction, whereby the very goods which move them push them to deny or denature all such goods. They are constitutionally incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking. Their thought is inescapably cramped.[136]

But this still means that there is a hypergood there, and this seems to mean that liberalism, while perhaps rendering us inarticulate cannot render us unable to discern our moral landscape, it cannot strip us of our necessary moral landmarks it can only partially occlude them from view. Liberals can argue that they have a moral language and landscape replete with a view of what it is good for a human to be. They are just unable to describe it as such. Hidden within the language of respect for the autonomy and dignity of the individual and his choices is a notion that it is an appropriate end of human existence that it be in part characterized by the autonomous choosing of ends.

A second strong objection to Taylor and MacIntyre's thought is raised by Will Kymlicka in his essay "The Ethics of Inarticulacy". Kymlicka mines a familiar critical vein of the liberal-communitarian debate, this time the "political not metaphysical" vein. Kymlicka acknowledges that liberalism, as Dworkin, Rawls et al. characterize it, leaves no *public* room for a substantive theory of the good. What Kymlicka argues is that

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[136] Taylor, Sources, p. 88.

liberalism in so doing leaves more than ample room in the *private* sphere for strong theories of the good to thrive. He writes

> The reason why contemporary moral philosophers do not view it as their task to articulate the good, despite the importance of this task, is that the specific features of morality, as a social institution, are not required to convince people to look for worthwhile ways of life. People, they assume, will naturally be interested in attending to questions of the good.[137]

What Kymlicka is rejecting is the tacit implication of both Taylor and MacIntyre that the public theory of liberalism will become a private moral theory for the individual citizen of a liberal society.

In a deeper sense Kymlicka is *almost* agreeing with Taylor (though his essay has *Sources of the Self* as its specific target) that individuals feel an intractable need to be connected with the good and to orientate themselves in moral space. Where liberals, even Kymlicka, disagree with Taylor, is in the appraisal, not of the role of the good, but in the risks involved in affirming a public good. Modern liberals, on this account of the theory at least, value the good at least as much as Taylor and MacIntyre. What liberals fear is the political consequences of publicly affirming a particular good. Liberals respond to the communitarian desire for a public good by asserting that the direst consequences of publicly affirming a particular view of the good would in all likelihood fall upon individuals with the strongest attachments and deepest understanding of the

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[137] Will Kymlicka, "The Ethics of Inarticulacy," Inquiry 34 (1991): 170.

importance of conceptions of the good. The modern disenchanted liberal individual as described by Taylor and MacIntyre, devoid of strong attachments to any good, might find such a public affirmation somewhat offensive to his dignity but an individual with a strong connection to a particular good might experience such a public affirmation as jeopardizing his connectedness to that which made his life comprehensible. Indeed this threat of severing a connection to the good lies at the heart of the practice of excommunication, a sanction only effective against those who really believe. Affirming a particular good might be perceived by those who are strongly attached to another good as endangering their connection to the good effectively excommunicating them. Individuals who felt that the state was acting in such a fashion would indubitably pose a threat to civil peace.

Liberalism by leaving questions of the good in the private sphere and refusing to have them publicly affirmed could argue that it believes that the innate longing to be connected to a conception of the good is even stronger than the level of attachment described by Taylor and MacIntyre. Liberals like Kymlicka claim it is strong enough to need no publicly nurturing and powerful enough to make political tampering with citizen's connection to their own particular conceptions of the good an exercise fraught with peril. The politically pragmatic claims that liberals make against significant public affirmation of a particular good seems also to point to a liberal belief that no public idea of the good could thwart citizen's attachment to the good. This, ironically, seems to leave

liberalism positing a stronger human connection to the good than communitarianism does.

In one last point of concern which is again almost an established dance step in the liberal-communitarian debate, the liberal response to Taylor and MacIntyre on the question of the good is to ask "where is this modern self?" The relationship that MacIntyre and Taylor see the modern self having to the good is obviously not one that is amenable to easy quantification. One can picture an absurd telephone survey asking people whether they can still meaningfully evaluate their existence and if so what role does a strong notion of the good play in such evaluation, but nonetheless there is a legitimate criticism here. As Stephen Clark writes of Taylor

> Sometimes, I suspect, he mistakes for 'modern' what is only middle class, white, lapsed Protestant...It especially odd that he should equate a particular American style with that of the "modern West": less widely traveled philosophers at least have some excuse. No other contemporary forms are really "modern".[138]

This is an important criticism and one that can be launched as compellingly against MacIntyre. The phenomena of disenchantment and the idea of life without a strong sense of the good hardly seems to fit for example with the millions of 'born again' evangelicals of the Southern and Western U.S.[139] Modernity is a precarious term at the best of times

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[138] Stephen R. Clark, "Taylor's Waking Dream," Inquiry 34 (1991) : 203.

[139] Ibid.,

and to describe the modern self is always to raise the suspicion that for every feature you describe you overlook ten others which may contradict it, and Clark does seem to have a point here. The question that remains however is: Do the philosophical propositions of liberalism create conditions which encourage the growth of a population that MacIntyre and Taylor describe and which will eventually envelope the other segments of society?

Chapter Four

The purpose of this chapter is to very briefly examine the point at which Taylor and

MacIntyre seem to agree the least, namely on the character of modern moral discourse.

This disagreement has been left until last not to provide a false impression of harmony

just now revealed as false but rather because it is unclear how this depiction of moral

discourse fits into the larger argument. Furthermore, the brevity of this chapter points not

to a weariness on the part of its author but rather to the real absence in both *After Virtue*

and *Sources of the Self* of a substantive development of argument regarding modern

moral discourse. Each philosopher's treatment of discourse is not a treatment of liberal

morality *per se* but rather a study of the nature of moral discourse in the liberal context.

Discourse should here be distinguished from the substance of liberal morality as each

philosopher sees it, a topic treated in the earlier chapters on the self, community and the

good. Discourse, as it will be treated here, means specifically the communicative act of

discussing and debating moral questions. As such what MacIntyre and Taylor are each

critiquing, Taylor most pointedly in his conclusion and MacIntyre most compellingly at

the outset of his argument, is not at this point conclusions they come to but the manner in

which moral questions are debated in liberal societies. Each philosopher chooses a

different point in their argument to treat this question and each comes to what appear to

be different answers regarding the question. However this chapter will argue that

underlying the differences there exists a more significant agreement about the

sustainability of modern moral discourse. A close read of both *Sources of the Self* and

After Virtue reveals that while Taylor and MacIntyre differ in their diagnosis they agree

regarding the dismal prognosis. In terms of remedy Taylor and MacIntyre each offer a

different remedy, the viability of which will be treated as an important element of this

thesis' conclusion.

 Alisdair MacIntyre considers the defining characteristic of modern moral

discourse to be one of conceptual incommensureability. Conceptual

incommensureability, according to MacIntyre, describes any debate fundamentally

characterized by the absence of a shared terminology which thereby renders genuine

communication impossible. MacIntyre contends that modern moral discourse suffers

from conceptual incommensureability and that this state of affairs prevents meaningful

debate just as completely as if the moral interlocutors failed to share a common language

at all. In contrast Charles Taylor views the modern dilemma in strikingly different terms:

Where MacIntyre sees incommensureability Taylor sees widespread moral consensus.

Taylor does not, however, see this consensus as cause for optimism. Taylor fears that

underlying this broad consensus is an absence of necessary moral foundations. The

agreement we enjoy, Taylor asserts, is radically deracinated as a result, he contends, our

consensus and the positions which comprise it lack the requisite moral sources to sustain

them. Where MacIntyre sees the moral condition of modern discourse as defined by a

lack of common ground on which to debate Taylor sees a shared ground but one that

lacks adequate depth and substance.

MacIntyre and Incommensureability

Alasdair MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* with what he considers to be a disquieting

suggestion about the nature of moral belief in the modern age. He pursues this suggestion

by presenting the reader with three moral questions that face the modern citizen: (1) the

possibility of a just war, (2) abortion, (3) social welfare policy. He points to these three

questions and asserts that the diverse positions taken on them suggest that "there seems

to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture".[140] Examining each

question and position MacIntyre highlights not one view as ultimately persuasive but

rather the possibility that no view is ultimately persuasive. This is so, MacIntyre argues,

because each position in each argument is coherent and consistent according to its own

first principles. MacIntyre illustrates in the case of the possibility of a just war by citing

Marxist, realist and pacifist arguments for and against war.[141] What these various

argument have in common, he suggests is that "Every one of the arguments is logically

valid or can be easily expanded so as to be made so; the conclusions do indeed follow

from the premises."[142] A pacifist position rooted in principles of culpability or a Marxist

position rooted in notions of proletarian emancipation argue back to a set of first

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[140] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 5

[141] Ibid.,

[142] Ibid., p. 8.

principles which are radically different. The question then becomes which set of first principles should one adopt? This question, MacIntyre contends, is rationally unanswerable or perhaps more accurately: the question of which first principles to chose, by virtue of being first principles is not open to rational justification. At this point the brevity of MacIntyre's argument registers as a major liability. What appears on first reading as given, that each position reasons back to different first principles, on closer examination seems suspect. Marxist arguments for emancipation and pacifist arguments for non-violence in the face of war are indeed different positions but at their root there exists significant conceptual commensureability. At the root of each argument is a first principle that the individual is worthy of respect and just treatment. Each position brings this principle of respect for the person into play differently but each is rooted in that respect. Moreover, one suspects both positions could be persuaded by the other to choose or eschew a particular option were it shown to be incompatible with respect for the person.

However, leaving aside the question of whether or not the specific positions MacIntyre chooses are in fact incommensureable, MacIntyre constructs a fierce argument against pluralism based on the premise of incommensureability. According to MacIntyre conceptual incommensureability's first consequence is that it exposes an absence rational justification of positions and, more importantly, it results in the impossibility of rational resolution in discourse. The absence of rational justification and resolution, MacIntyre asserts, leads to public and personal consequences that have come to be seen as

symptomatic of the modern malaise. A key consequence is that our contemporary debate

has become increasingly harsh in tone. MacIntyre writes

> From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but
>
> when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of
>
> one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and
>
> counter-assertion. Hence perhaps the slightly shrill tone of so much of
>
> much moral debate .[143]

The problem, as MacIntyre sees it, goes far beyond simple shrillness. If we have no

rational means by which to discern between rival premises our debates become more

than simply interminable. Arguments begin to take on an the appearance of arbitrariness.

They take on this appearance because first principles by their very nature permit of no

further justification. For the Marxist and the realist alike final conclusions are rooted in

principles claiming to have the character of fundamental moral truths; all that remains

beyond first principles are empty tautologies.

The question the individual faces is which set of premises are more preferable, to

return to the case of the just war, which set of premises about the way of the world

should one choose: pacifist, realist or Marxist? Since each is, according to MacIntyre,

logically consistent, the choice seems to become one rooted in little more than personal

preference. Logic and reason can discern whether or not statements on war made by a

given outlook are valid or invalid in terms of an argument's premises but which argument

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[143] Ibid.,

to choose is a question that reason and logic cannot discern. The choice of one view over another becomes akin to the choice between chess and backgammon.

To illustrate MacIntyre's claim it is useful to stick briefly with the analogy of a choice between chess and backgammon. A debate between fans of chess versus those of backgammon must at the end of the day be reduced to a stating of personal preference. There seems no rational means of discerning the superiority of one game's set of rules over the other's. So too, by MacIntyre's lights, with debate between competing views. Each view has at its base a series of fundamental truths amenable to no further justifying. Just as there is no outside and agreed upon meta-principle capable of deciding between chess and backgammon so too with competing moral rule systems. This has dire consequences for the way we perceive of each other as moral agents. MacIntyre warns

> Yet if we possess no unassailable criteria, no set of compelling reasons by means of which we may convince our opponents, it follows that in the process of making up our own minds we can have made no appeal to such criteria or such reasons. If I lack any good reason to invoke against you, it must seem that I lack any good reasons. Hence it seems that underlying my own position there must be some non-rational decision to adopt that position.[144]

What MacIntyre is pointing out is the natural consequence of being presented with an individual who presents, but fails to adequately defend(for indeed how can they?), a set

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[144] Ibid.,

of fundamental truths different from one's own. At the point of arguing over postulates which are held to be fundamental truths an interlocutor may only respond "because its true." To one who disagrees this must necessarily seem an arbitrary and unreflective defense. This observation has massive social import. Concluding that a person chooses backgammon over chess for ultimately non-rational and unjustifiable reasons is relatively harmless. However, when it comes to moral debate especially about public questions, to come to the same conclusion about fellow citizens beliefs undermines the possibility for civil society. According to MacIntyre's argument it undermines civil society by making those who fail to share our views appear to be either less rational or not at all rational for selecting first principles which when truly pressed they are incapable of defending. As a result : "Corresponding to the interminability of public argument there is at least the appearance of a disquieting private arbitrariness. It is small wonder we become defensive and shrill."[145] Defensive and shrill tones mark a decline in discourse that has at its potential end offensive action meant to silence or remove those who fail to agree and who remain uncowed in the face of shrill tones.

MacIntyre argues that individuals will not tolerate long any impression that their own beliefs may also be arbitrary. To alleviate this sense of arbitrariness and interminability individuals refer to *independent* sources. These are alleged meta-principles that appear to imbue add credence to their arguments. The reference to an allegedly independent verificatory source is a reference

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[145] Ibid.,

to a type of consideration which is independent of the relationship
between speaker and hearer. Its use presupposes the existence of
impersonal criteria-the existence, independently of the preferences or
attitudes of speaker and hearer, of standards of justice or generosity or
duty.[146]

Appeals to impersonal criteria reveal a deep seated need within members of modern
societies to be seen as rational. Unfortunately, when each position on a given question
invokes the existence of outside impersonal and invariably affirmative criteria, it is easy
to see how beyond simple conflict about the nature of such criteria the very idea of such
criteria comes into disrepute. This disrepute further reduces the possibility of genuine
moral agreement or even mutual comprehension.

What are we left with? For MacIntyre the situation of modern moral debate is
one of incommensureability, arbitrariness, and disillusionment. We speak in hopelessly
incommensureable moral languages which prevent moral agreement on any question.
Presented with competing sets of first principles we begin to suspect that those who
disagree with us have chosen non-rationally (the acutely introspective will suspect the
same of themselves), and as each side invokes impersonal criteria we begin to doubt the
possibility of such criteria. At this point our suspicions about others irrationality must

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[146]Ibid., p. 9

for the genuinely self-aware turn inward.[147] The impossibility of agreement, MacIntyre concludes, leads moderns to a new, quintessentially modern civic virtue: pluralism.

For MacIntyre pluralism is a *modus vivendi* agreement to disagree about conceptions of the good or about the import of a particular worldview. In modernity it signals a deep incoherence in our civil and moral discourse merely "dignified by the title 'pluralism'".[148] Pluralism, in MacIntyre's thought, is meant to signify little more than an agreement to keep those things about which we cannot agree (or even adequately convey) out of the public space. What it is not is a 'multicultural mosaic' or an 'exciting cultural stew' or any other such platitude; for MacIntyre it signals nothing less than the collapse of civil debate. A troubling consequence of this is that deciding to discontinue an interminable debate about abortion, the just war, or other pressing public issues does not resolve anything. Interminability in discourse translates into impotence in praxis.

Charles Taylor on the Unbearable Lightness of Moral Discourse

At first glance Charles Taylor seems to disagree almost completely with MacIntyre's description of the condition of modern moral discourse. He takes some of the very same examples that MacIntyre uses to point to incoherence and suggests that these are merely 'hard cases'. Taylor argues that these debates are aberrations from a larger moral consensus. In the conclusion of *Sources of the Self* he writes of modern moral discourse

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[147] Ibid., p. 8.

[148] Ibid., p. 32.

We agree surprisingly well, across great differences of theological and metaphysical belief, about the demands of justice and benevolence, and their importance. There are differences, including the stridently debated one about abortion. But the very rarity of these cases, which contributes to their saliency, is eloquent testimony to the general agreement.[149]

Taylor thus turns MacIntyre on his head. Abortion is not to be understood as a question which reveals the deep incoherence of our moral discourse but rather the focus on such points of disagreement is proof of their rarity. For Taylor the exception proves the rule.

Taylor argues that modern moral discourse is characterized by a broad consensus on most public moral dilemmas. He points to the consensus regarding the unacceptability of judicial torture and mutilation and a rejection of racism to support his argument. What these examples illustrate, he contends, is a broad agreement on moral standards in liberal society. From this one could easily conclude that Taylor sees little wrong with modern moral discourse. To so conclude is to mistake a broad consensus as being a sufficient condition for a strong and vital moral community. For Taylor, while it is a necessary condition consensus it is far from sufficient. Where MacIntyre sees the primary ailment of modern moral discourse to be conceptual incommensureability Taylor sees it as insubstantiality. Modern moral discourse, to once more borrow Milan Kundera's phrase, suffers from *an unbearable lightness of being*, it is insufficiently rooted in a substantive moral source. According to Taylor, moderns face a new dilemma:

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[149] Taylor, Sources p. 515.

The question which arises from all this is whether we are not living

beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of

justice and benevolence. Do we have ways of seeing good which are still

credible to us, which are powerful enough to sustain these standards?[150]

What Taylor is pointing to with this question is the absence of the strong moral belief

systems of earlier centuries. In *Sources of the Self* as in *After Virtue* a great deal of time

is spent tracing the genealogy of modern liberal identity and morality. In so tracing

Taylor, like MacIntyre, points to the casting off of the old cosmologies and acknowledges

that this may have been experienced as a liberation but suggests that this liberation has

come at the cost of the underlying explanatory and ultimately compelling reasons for

acting in a given fashion.

It is in describing the consequences of the modern loss of deeply held moral

principles rooted in a moral tradition that Taylor's argument comes closest to

MacIntyre's concerns. Taylor feels that without the strong moral sources older

cosmologies provided individuals are left with only personal predilection to motivate

their actions. Taylor argues that on the Christian view individuals feel compelled to act

in a certain manner because of the innate worth of humans which arises out of their being

God's creations. Taylor asserts that

The original Christian notion of *agape* is of a love that God has for

humans which is connected with their goodness (though we don't have to

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[150] Taylor, Sources, p. 517.

decide whether they are loved because good or good because loved). Human beings participate through grace in this love. There is a divine affirmation of the creature, which is captured in the repeated phrase in Genesis I about each stage of the creatures 'and seeing God saw that it was good." *Agape* is inseparable from such a "seeing-good".[151]

This idea of seeing good, Taylor asserts, forms a compelling reason for individuals to respect one another and treat one another with dignity. Taylor argues that what is needed always is an outside reason for acting in a certain way. Inward reasons such as that acting in a certain way makes one feel good or that to refrain brings on feelings of guilt are, he asserts, causally insufficient in the long run. Taylor forcefully asserts that

> High standards need strong sources. This is because there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self satisfaction.[152]

Taylor argues that a morality so based necessarily falls victim to the Nietzchean critique of morality. If it is not 'powered by an affirmation of the recipient as a being of value, then pity is destructive to the giver and degrading to the receiver".

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[151] Taylor, Sources, p. 516.

[152] Ibid.,

A key question arises here, one that goes beyond Taylor's clearly altogether too brief exposition of Christianity's role in sustaining morality. The question is not whether or not Christianity can sustain a given mode of existence but rather the converse, can a given mode of existence sustain christianity or any other strong moral source. Taylor acknowledges that high standards demand strong sources but shies away from explicitly acknowleding that high standards and strong sources exact heavy burdens. Even his definition of *agape* and Christianity avoids a discussion of burden, Taylor depicts Christianity as involving seeing good, not acknowleding evil and opposing it. He discusses affirmation but not condemnation either transcendant or immanent. While one can only guess, due in part to the absence of a well developed argument, why Taylor offers such a "light' version of Christianity the answer may lie in a resignation regarding the liberal citizen. If Taylor has resigned himself to a liberal citizen who chooses his affiliations then those affiliations must be made to appear attractive or even just plain made attractive. But if high standards need strong sources which place heavy demands on the person which may appear unattractive then how without coercion are such sources ever going to be chosen?

Sustenance for Taylor is conceived of in terms not of the survival of a system but in terms of whether that system gives compelling reasons to act in a certain way. It is at this point that Taylor and MacIntyre come closest to agreeing. MacIntyre, as has already been discussed, fears that our moral sources will come to be seen as arbitrary and therefore not compelling, as a consequence of moral discourse in an age of pluralism.

Taylor sees our moral sources as vanishing and asserts that what they have been replaced

with, whether it is art, philosophy or the empty platitudes of popular culture is

insufficient to give us compelling reasons to act morally. The underlying agreement

between Taylor and MacIntyre is that the modern self is one that may fail to possess

compelling and therefore deeply held reasons for moral action. Moral discourse which is

seen by liberals primarily in terms of *how* we talk about moral issues is seen by both

philosophers primarily as indicative of the *what* of our modern moral life, and the *what*

they see is the possibility for morality itself in dangerous decline.

Conclusion

One of the defining characteristics of the communitarian critique is its *via negativa*. It appears nowhere clearer than in the work of Taylor and MacIntyre in terms of political prescriptions. Both works can be described as philosophical treatise, moral genealogy, or even social critique. What they cannot be described meaningfully as is political manifesto. These two philosophers, in terms of actual policy or program argue for surprisingly little, they speak often of what is needed but rarely of what to do. Only in the final pages of each book does the reader get any hint of what Taylor or MacIntyre thinks we ought to do. Even the inchoate prescriptions that each only minimally adumbrates have a life only in opposition to what they see in modernity, primarily in the modern liberal understanding of morality.

The primary positive program that each work is seen as having by its respective author is one of recovery. For MacIntyre the recovery is a recovery of order, an attempt to pull moral discourse out of the incoherence he sees as the defining characteristic of its modern incarnation. Taylor sees as the object of recovery morality's attachment to its moral sources. MacIntyre writes in his introduction that "we possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have-very largely-if not entirely lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."[153] The

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[153] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 2.

point of *After Virtue* is to recover the comprehension and the deeper substance of morality. The task Taylor assigns to *Sources of the Self* is remarkably similar. Like MacIntyre he remarks almost at the outset that what he wants to retrieve "and examine the richer background languages in which we set the basis and point of the moral obligations we acknowledge".[154] Both works can be viewed, at least from their authors perspectives, as works of retrieval or recovery of something of the past that is now absent.

Throughout each text the language used by the authors as discussed already at length repeatedly refers to a perceived modern loss of resonance, depth, or richer substance of being. For both philosophers the recovery of resonance or depth or substance requires a turning back to an older way of being in the world. For MacIntyre this forms the crux of his argument regarding the Aristotelian conception of the virtues. For Taylor it seems to entail a turning away from our increasingly secular age back to some transcendental belief system, specifically, a turn back to Christianity. It would be impossible at this juncture to do justice to either alternative at any great length Indeed Taylor's defense of a return to religion, specifically Christianity, is offered in only the most nascent form with the claim that to do it justice would require another book. Instead Taylor leaves his religious claim as a "hunch" of which he writes that "the potential of a theistic perspective is incomparably greater. Dostoeyevsky has framed this

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[154] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 3.

perspective better than I ever could here."[155] Alisdair MacIntyre, in stark contrast,

dedicates much of his book to the premise that what needs to be recovered is a concept of

the virtues. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this thesis to evaluate either claim on

its own merit. What it is possible to do at this juncture is to discuss what the very making

of such proposals reveals about each thinker's perspective on the pluralist present.

What is important to analyze is the singular character of each proposal and how

the proposal of singular and substantive ideas fits or fails to fit with modern liberal

pluralist democracies. MacIntyre makes it clear throughout *After Virtue* that he feels

that his proposals must necessarily fail to be accepted across society. Indeed as they

encounter other moral schemas it is unclear how they could be any less vulnerable to

conceptual incommensureability than any other set of beliefs. MacIntyre acknowledges

this and in the closing sentences of *After Virtue* he describes his work not in terms of

proselytizing but in terms of an almost monastic retreat inward. MacIntyre contends that:

> What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community
>
> within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained
>
> through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition
>
> of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are
>
> not entirely without grounds for hope.[156]

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[155] Ibid., p. 518.

[156] MacIntyre, Virtue, p. 263.

What MacIntyre envisions is clearly not a revolution, nor is it even a slow attempt to build a consensus; it is at best a rear guard action against liberal pluralism. *After Virtue* argues that the like-minded ought to attempt to build small local communities to weather the storm(it is no small irony that a liberal social order is perhaps the most tolerant of such a retreat). He suspects pluralism amounts to not so much polyphony as cacophony, where most public intellectual and moral discourse is little more than "an unharmonious melange of ill-assorted fragments".[157] Within these local communities, one suspects that MacIntyre sees all that he has advocated regarding the good, community and the self. Here these ideas are to be debated in shared terms developed and cherished until some point in the future left undescribed at which they may go forth once again to the masses.

Taylor's language is much less dark in its implication. He doesn't speak of retreat but rather of retrieval, retrieval of the moral source he sees in Christianity. This good, Taylor argues, has too long been set aside in modernity because of what he sees as a cardinal error secular thinkers make in evaluating the legacy of the Christian churches.

> Characteristically, these take the self-destructive consequences of a spiritual aspiration as a refutation of this aspiration. They make once again what I believe is the cardinal mistake of believing that a good must be invalid if it leads to suffering or destruction.[158]

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[157] ibid., p. 10.

[158] Taylor, <u>Sources</u>, p. 519.

Taylor argues that setting aside the good of religious conviction, even if it is politically

pragmatic is ultimately stifling, even mutilating of the "deepest and most powerful

spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived".[159] If we are to sustain ourselves

morally he concludes, the resources of secular culture, whether aesthetic, philosophical

or scientific are insufficient. Spiritual goods, he concludes are fundamental and

necessary to our existence. When we remove them from public life and discourse we

stifle them, and more alarmingly "since they are our goods, human goods, *we* are

stifling".[160] Liberals need not refute Taylor's assertion. Liberals need not argue against

religion but only against a public religion. They can respond to Taylor by observing that

when religion becomes public any diminishing of spiritual stifling has all too often been

accompanied by an increase in actual stifling.

What both philosopher's prescriptions share, in different ways, is a view of our

public moral culture in which substantive ideas of the good, thick theories of the self, and

strong communities bound together by these ideas replace the liberal and procedural

order they see offered by modern liberalism

It has been argued throughout this thesis that Taylor and MacIntyre's indictment

of liberalism rests on the assumption that the political proposals of liberal theory

inevitably bleed into the private moral lives of liberal citizens. Even if they do not, the

argument seems to follow, the public discourse, even the public lives of liberal citizens

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[159] Ibid., p. 520.

[160] Ibid.,

are unquestionably shallower and less meaningful (in the truest sense of the word). To

respond to the critique of Taylor and MacIntyre, it could be presumed that one must

justify this loss of depth. This is a mistaken presumption. Liberals can be just as

remorseful as Taylor and MacIntyre about the losses they see. Indeed many liberals, Will

Kymlicka in particular, are *at least as sad* at the loss of a deep public moral culture as

Taylor and MacIntyre. What liberals must argue is that such a loss is better than any

attempt at retrenchment.

Arguing against retrenchment from the liberal perspective it seems important to

separate what Taylor and MacIntyre each see as most needing retrenchment in liberal

culture and treat each separately. For MacIntyre what it is important to regain in our

public debate is conceptual commensureability, a way of arguing about our moral

questions in which we share a moral terminology and common metaphysic. Turning

briefly to the treatment of the early years of the civil rights movement in Allan Bloom's

The Closing of the American Mind we see what such a shared moral language can mean

for public discourse. Bloom writes that between the advocates of the civil rights

movement and the general public was a shared political and moral language, a language

that arose out of the Bible, in particular the Book of Exodus, on one hand, and a constant

reference to the political documents of the American Founders, on the other. The use of

these documents meant, according to Bloom, that

> They [civil rights movement] could charge whites not only with the most
>
> monstrous injustices but also with contradicting their own most sacred

principles. The blacks were the true Americans in demanding the equality
that belongs to them as natural and political right. This stance implied a
firm conviction of the truth of the principles of natural right and of their
fundamental efficacy within the Constitutional tradition.[161]

Beyond the moral or historical significance of the documents invoked is what matters
most: that they were shared. Bloom goes on to argue that the civil rights movement
came to a halt in the late sixties as a result of its turn towards the language of difference,
of afro-centrism in particular, which was by definition unshared. This was a moral
language that, in MacIntyre's terms, was incommensureable with that of other
Americans. Accepting this view, for arguments sake, we can see how the shared
terminology made debate and even eventual limited consensus possible. The shifting
into a new and non-ubiquitous moral language made continued public discourse about
civil rights impossible. What I suspect, and for now it must remain a suspicion is that
such a shift is inevitable in any mass society. We live in an age characterized by
mobility, social, geographic, political, and even marital. These mobilities make
agreement over terms less likely, dialogue less substantive, shared meaning less likely to
occur. As Michael Walzer writes

> All in all, we liberals probably know one another less well, and with less
> assurance than people once did...we are more often alone than people

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[161] Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind (New York, New York: Simon &
Schuster Inc., 1987), p. 33.

once were, being without neighbours we can count on, relatives who live

nearby or with whom we are close, or comrades at work or in the

movement.[162]

We see less of each other, our relationships are less permanent, our surroundings even

less so, to paraphrase Yeats if the community cannot hold, *things fall apart*. The

increased mobility of our age, combined with an ethos of liberty and autonomy, is so

conducive to diversity that the shift that Bloom sees as regrettable can just as easily be

seen as inevitable. Indeed the inevitability of pluralism, as a result of the failure of the

enlightenment project of rational moral justification, is a key element of MacIntyre's

argument in *After Virtue*. What is troubling about his argument is not that he recognizes

pluralism as inevitable but that his opposition to it is so vehement and polemic.

That MacIntyre describes modern liberal culture as a new dark ages has already

been discussed, as has his exhortation to the like-minded to retreat into local community.

What is troubling is not this exhortation but that it is not the only exhortation open to the

like-minded. Given the force of MacIntyre's arguments about the perils of pluralism it

seems one could just as easily take description of liberal culture and revise the

exhortation, instead of retreat why not advocate attack? To the serious reader of

MacIntyre the question in this instance is how do we respond to failure of the

Enlightenment project and the subsequent collapse of morality and community? Taking

MacIntyre seriously it seems reasonable to say that by silencing the voices of the politics

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[162] Walzer,"Communitarian Critique": 13.

of normative pluralism we could restore debate, defend civility, and at least slow if not

prevent a new dark ages. The question, then, becomes: When is such silencing

acceptable in terms of the greater good? This is a slippery slope. MacIntyre doesn't

argue for it, but he opens the door for others.

Liberals respond to this same loss by arguing that any retrenchment, any attempt

to restore a singular moral and political language, can happen only at the expense of

liberty. Liberals reluctantly acknowledge and accept that the possibility of political

community as MacIntyre understands it has passed. Rawls responds to those who would

attempt to restore political community in *Political Liberalism*

> To this objection, we say that the hope of political community must
>
> indeed be abandoned, if by such a community we mean a political society
>
> united in affirming the same comprehensive doctrine. This possibility is
>
> excluded by the fact of reasonable pluralism together with the rejection of
>
> the oppressive use of the state power to overcome it.[163]

Both Taylor and MacIntyre have argued that the freedoms of modern liberal societies

have come at a high price. Liberals respond that to turn the clock back would cost even

more. Moreover, liberals argue that by virtue of the institutions of liberal society, even if

it is, as MacIntyre claims, a new dark ages, it is one that is without end; the clock cannot

be turned back. Liberal institutions breed autonomy and with it diversity. Deep

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[163] John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 146.

pluralism is, according to Rawls, "not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy"[164] If this is so then MacIntyre's closing remarks can be seen to be deeply ominous. They are ominous because if one takes MacIntyre and Rawls seriously then one must either retreat permanently or wait to find an opportune moment to fight. If deep pluralism is a permanent state of affairs then MacIntyre's suggested retreat is also a permanent state of affairs and not just a weathering of the storm. Few would choose permanent retreat. MacIntyre writes that those who have retreated wait not for "a Godot, but for another-doubtless very different-St. Benedict."[165] What form this different St. Benedict will take remains undisclosed but perhaps it is important to note that the last Dark Ages in Europe ended as much because of El Cid and the bloodshed of the Reconquista as it did because of St. Benedict and St. Thomas Aquinas. The texts of classical philosophy that ushered in the Renaissance were passed into the hands of St. Thomas Aquinas and others not by monks or scholars but by the soldiers who took the Islamic libraries of Moorish Spain by force.

To discuss the deficiencies of modern liberal culture when it comes to Taylor is much more difficult than it is with MacIntyre. Throughout the preceding chapters, we have seen how Taylor wants to broaden out our moral language and find a place again in it for notions of the good. Taylor believes that we may be living beyond our means in

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[164] Ibid., p.36.

[165] MacIntyre,Virtue, p. 263.

attempting to sustain discourse and consensus without these moral sources primarily the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It is difficult to criticize this portion of Taylor's argument at length for the simple reason that he provides so little to critique. It is not until the closing pages of his more than five hundred page text that Taylor *comes out in favour of* religious conviction as a necessary undergirding of morality. The appropriate place for theistic beliefs is a question of primary importance to any treatment of identity and morality. Taylor claims that he leaves it till the end of *Sources of the Self* because he feels that there is insufficient space to tackle the issue within the confines of a single book (though one may question this commitment to brevity given the almost 100 pages dedicated to a discussion of 19th and 20th century art and poetry). A more likely hypothesis, though it must remain a hypothesis, is that Taylor deliberately conceals his religious convictions in order to get the bulk of his argument across before having to defend what much of the modern world will find indefensible namely: the re-introduction of religious conviction into public life.

The reintroduction of religious conviction may or may not be indefensible, indeed reasonable individuals thinking on the question can certainly formulate reasons for its re-introduction. However in liberal theory and liberal culture in particular a long tradition of setting theistic questions outside the public pale militates against any real possibility of meaningful re-introduction. Liberalism's focus on the primacy of the individual and the importance of his autonomy militates powerfully against such a re-introduction. Eric

Voegelin argues that it also violates an essential element of liberal theory and praxis,

arguing that

> Its [liberalism's] essence is the assumption of the autonomy of immanent
>
> human reason as the source of knowledge. Liberals speak of free research
>
> in the sense of liberation from "authorities", that is, not only from
>
> revelation and dogmatism, but also from classical philosophy, the
>
> rejection of which become a point of honour.[166]

Liberals have long believed, Voegelin argues, that the removal of the transcendental from

the political is what liberated humans from the old social hierarchies. The removal of the

theistic meant the removal of any divine right to rule. Furthermore liberals, especially

during the Enlightenment, assumed that being freed from religion men and women would

govern themselves based not on dogmatism and the authority of revelation but with

reason. Reason was taken to be more in tune with human dignity and universally

accessible, which was vital in an emerging age of equality.[167] This is a deep, centuries

old, thread in liberal culture. It defines much of the way the modern sees himself.

Liberals further blame dogmatism and even revelation for the most destructive violence

in our history, and argue that public shallowness has brought with it peace and stability.

Taylor acknowledges this admitting that the highest goods of the spiritual are potentially

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[166] Eric Voegelin, "Liberalism and its History," The Review of Politics 36 (1974) : 515.

[167] Voegelin, "History,": 517.

the most destructive and admitting that "maybe the prudent path is the safest, and we

shouldn't unconditionally rejoice at the indiscriminate retrieval of empowering goods.

Maybe a little judicious stifling may be the part of wisdom".[168] But again I think Taylor

misses the point. It is not only that his solution may need to be moderated, but that it is

no longer a viable one. Long before it succumbs to political principles or even to

pragmatism it must necessarily succumb to the voluntarist principle. The age of public

religion or moral culture has passed, indeed, increasingly it seems the age of popularly

held and practiced belief has passed. Without equating the two for anything more than

illustrative purposes one can argue that the re-introduction of religious belief to public

discourse is about as viable as the re-introduction of Aristotelian astronomy to scientific

debate. Taylor's arguments, brief as they are, point to a denial of the nature of the

identity whose origins he has so carefully traced. To return again to Walzer who states

the case with particular clarity

> American communitarians have to recognize that there is no one out there
>
> but separated, rights bearing, voluntarily associating, freely speaking,
>
> liberal selves. It would be a good thing, though, if we could teach those
>
> selves to know themselves as social beings, the historical products of, and
>
> in part embodiments of, liberal values.[169]

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[168] Taylor, Sources, p. 520.

[169] Walzer, "Communitarian Critique,": 15.

Taylor leaves his theistic argument till last and states it briefly because he knows to whom he writes, a culture that has set aside religious conviction in its public life and will hear no more of it, except in its blandest and most diluted form (one thinks of American Inauguration Day prayers). The placement and brevity of his argument on this point hints at his own lack of conviction as to the plausibility of his solution.

Taylor and MacIntyre's political thought seems to work best as a critique of what is wrong with liberal culture. In *After Virtue* MacIntyre describes modern liberal culture as a dark age from which we should retreat. In this sense his discussion of the way we debate morality is more of a lament than a call to action. However it is a dangerous lament one that too easily can be twisted into a raging against the dying of the light. Taylor's treatment of modern liberal society begins on a much more positive note, claiming that we agree much more than we disagree, that we have achieved a consensus around key beliefs about how we should live and treat one another. Taylor's argument too is a lament, but one whose tone is revealed not in the substance of his prose but its structure. In a work of more than five hundred pages he leaves the hopeful note, the suggestion for betterment until very last and then only whispers its softly and briefly as if worried he might offend. This gives his argument the aspect not so much of a plan for a better future but rather a somewhat wistful whistling in the wind.

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