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Charles Taylor's Philosophy of Deep Diversity

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Abstract

Charles Taylor's idea of "deep diversity" has played a major role in debates over multiculturalism in Canada and around the world. Originally, the idea was meant to account for how different groups within Canada — anglophone Canadians, francophone Quebecers, and Indigenous — conceive of their belonging to the country in different ways. Taylor, however, conceives of these differences strictly in terms of irreducibility; that is, he fails to see that they also mean that the country cannot be said to form a unified whole. After giving an account of the philosophical as well as theological reasons for this, I explore its political implications.

Résumé

L'idée de « la diversité profonde » de Charles Taylor a joué un rôle majeur dans les débats sur le multiculturalisme au Canada et dans le monde. À l'origine, cette idée était censée rendre compte de la manière dont les différents groupes au sein du Canada — les Canadiens anglophones, les Québécois francophones et les autochtones — conçoivent leur appartenance au pays de différentes manières. Taylor, cependant, conçoit ces différences strictement en termes d'irréductibilité, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne voit pas qu'elles signifient également que le pays ne peut pas être considéré comme formant un tout unifié. Après avoir exposé les raisons philosophiques et théologiques de ce constat, j'en explore les implications politiques.

Keywords: Charles Taylor; diversity; irreducibility; monism; pluralism

1. Introduction

From an outpost of empire to a beacon of multiculturalism, Canada since Confederation has understood its internal differences with a variety of concepts. One thing we Canadians have failed to do, however, is to distinguish between "diversity" and "pluralism." In fact, as I shall argue here, Charles Taylor's idea of "deep diversity," which has played a major role in the debates over multiculturalism in

Canada and around the world, is inhospitable to pluralism. There is both good and bad about this; still, my claim is that Taylor's deep diversity isn't deep enough.

To be sure, Taylor has never gone so far as to describe his philosophy as defending a monism. The closest he's come is when he referred to himself with Isaiah Berlin's famous hedgehog metaphor while explaining that his first collection of philosophical papers reflects "[i]f not a single idea, then at least a single rather tightly related agenda" (Taylor, 1985a, p. 1). Moreover, Taylor's acute sensitivity to the dilemmas that can arise between values could easily lead one to question the label. So, one of my aims here will be to explain why I believe he is indeed a monist.

Monism and pluralism are best understood as diverging answers to the classic metaphysical question about "the One and the Many." I see that question as concerned with the *degree of connection* between things: Are they cohesive and so, together, do they exhibit a oneness, thereby constituting a unity? Or are they disconnected and fragmented, thereby constituting a plurality? (Or are they, somehow, both?)

It is important to distinguish between this question and the mereological one that asks about wholes and parts and so contrasts, not monism and pluralism, but holism and atomism. Rather than addressing issues of cohesion or fragmentation, mereologists are interested in how far an entity's parts can be considered *dependent on* or *independent of* it as a whole: dependence is holist while independence is atomist. Consider how we define human nature. The holist conception of it sees people as inherently social and so as incapable of, say, negotiating a social contract within some pre-social state of nature. Taylor himself has described this thesis as follows:

What has been argued in the different theories of the social nature of man is not just that men cannot physically survive alone, but much more that they only develop their characteristically human capacities in society. The claim is that living in society is a necessary condition of the development of rationality, in some sense of this property, or of becoming a moral agent in the full sense of the term, or of becoming a fully responsible, autonomous being. (Taylor, 1985b, pp. 190–191)

An atomist conception of human nature, by contrast, would see us as capable of autonomy within the state of nature. Even someone who was raised by wolves could, in theory, develop the capacities necessary to be considered fully human.

Mereology, then, supports a spectrum of positions on which we can expect to find wholes with irreducible parts near its holist end and wholes with reducible parts near its atomist end. That is why holism brings the idea of a larger number of different parts and atomism the idea of a smaller number. It is also why I think we should distinguish between "multiplicity" and "plurality" by associating the former with irreducibility and the latter with fragmentation. Because to say that we need to recognize more parts of some whole doesn't necessarily mean that the whole is disunified. Think of Christianity's doctrine of the Trinity. As Augustine argued, to claim that God consists of three distinct persons is not at all to undermine His unity, for they *are* one (Augustine, 1990, I.iv.7, V.xi.12, VII.iv.8).¹ Multiplicity, then, is one thing, and

¹ Whence Taylor: "it seems that the life of God itself, understood as trinitarian, is already a oneness" (Taylor, 2011a, p. 168).

plurality another. Taylor, however, doesn't always keep these categories separate — as when, for instance, he tells us that it is possible to travel along the “road to wholeness” by recognizing, and so realizing, “unity-across-difference” (Taylor, 2011a, p. 168). Of course, it doesn't help that the word “wholeness” is a synonym for “unity,” with “wholeness being in fact a sort of oneness,” as Aristotle said long ago (Aristotle, 2001, 1023b35–36).² But while wholeness can equate with unbrokenness, we must still be careful not to conflate holism with coherence and so unity.

2. Fundamentals of Deep Diversity

Taylor first introduced the idea of deep diversity in 1993, in “Shared and Divergent Values,” a chapter in *Reconciling the Solitudes* (Taylor, 1993, pp. 155–186) that criticizes the failure of many to appreciate how different groups within Canada — above all, the English-speaking Canadians, the French-speaking Quebecers, and the Indigenous — conceive of their belonging to the country in different ways. To Taylor, we need to recognize how, if we're to have a truly inclusive Canada, it

would have to allow for second-level or “deep” diversity, in which a plurality of ways of belonging would also be acknowledged and accepted [...] Is this utopian? Could people ever come to see their country this way? Could they even find it exciting and an object of pride that they belong to a country that allows deep diversity? Pessimists say no, because they do not see how such a country could have a sense of unity. The model of citizenship has to be uniform, or people would have no sense of belonging to the same polity. (Taylor, 1993, p. 183)

Notice how, with “plurality,” Taylor is invoking what I would instead refer to as “multiplicity.” Because as his reference to “a sense of unity” here makes clear, he wants us to accept not that the country could be to some degree fragmented, but that there is more than one way to be part of it.³

It is hard to exaggerate how important a contribution this idea has been to Canadian political thought. Would former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's 2006 motion on the Québécois nation have been possible without it, or the widespread sense that much more needs to be done to do justice to the country's Indigenous peoples? I doubt it.

In any case, the kinds of differences that Taylor's deep diversity makes room for are, once again, strictly mereological. For they are based on irreducibility and holism, and so are multiple but not necessarily plural; they exclude uniformity, in other words, but not unity. After all, as Taylor states, the goal remains that of a “united federal Canada” (Taylor, 1993, p. 183). So much the better, you may say. But notice what this rules out: a Canada that's diverse enough to accept potentially irreconcilable conflicts, “gaps” that cut across its parts and, in this way, the whole (Blattberg, 2021a). Taylor's

² Or as Barnes more recently put it: “The concept of a whole nuzzles intimately against the concept of a unity” (Barnes, 2011, p. 431).

³ Taylor has been calling for this for a very long time. Here he is in 1967: “We have to develop a society in which diversity is welcomed as richness and not feared as the prelude to division” (Taylor, 1967, p. 5).

ideal Canada has no place for such conflicts; it is strictly *diversi sed non adversi* (“diverse but not adverse”), as the Latin maxim has it.

The reasons for this exclusion are not only philosophical but theological. Consider Taylor’s landmark book, *Sources of the Self*, which concludes with a discussion of “the conflicts of modernity.” As he states there, the compromises required should we fail to overcome “the dilemma of mutilation,” as he calls our overall predicament, are “in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge” (Taylor, 1989, p. 521). Taylor is nevertheless relatively optimistic about our ability to meet this challenge — and he is even though he is willing not only to acknowledge the fullest possible range of conflicting goods but also to conceive of some of them as “hypergoods.” This is the name he gives to our most fundamental goods, the ones that serve as the cornerstones of our moral frameworks. Yet hypergoods can also call for the supersession of certain other goods outright:

as the principle of equal respect has been doing to the goods and virtues connected with traditional family life, as Judaism and Christianity did to the cults of pagan religions, and as the author of the *Republic* did to the goods and virtues of agonistic citizen life. (Taylor, 1989, p. 65)

It is because these conflicts have the power to cut so deep that we “have to search for a way in which our strongest aspirations towards hypergoods do not exact a price of self-mutilation.” And as Taylor states categorically (as well as monistically) regarding that search: “I believe that such a reconciliation is possible” (Taylor, 1989, p. 107). Indeed, it is a belief that Taylor sees “implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided” (Taylor, 1989, p. 521).⁴

Yet this is actually more Christian than Jewish, since Jewish redemption corresponds with a doctrine of return (*t’shuvah*, תְּשׁוּבָה), according to which anyone can repent at any time and thereby receive God’s forgiveness (see Jonah 3:10 and Isaiah 55:7 on return; and Amos 9:7 on how the Israelites are not God’s only chosen people). *T’shuvah*, incidentally, stresses not the state of mind but the act. In fact, the Hebrew word for religion (*dat*, דָּת), which translates as “law,” encourages Jews such as myself to emphasize practice over belief, and the act of reconciliation over any conception of right.

Regardless, Taylor cannot accept *t’shuvah* for the same reason he must avoid committing the Pelagian heresy, according to which redemption is possible without Christological intercession. As he writes, one of the key mysteries of the Christian faith has to do with “why we are in the grip of evil, why we were/are somehow incapable of healing ourselves to overcome this condition, and become the kind of creatures which we know we were made to be.” Another is “how the sacrifice of Christ broke through this helplessness, and opened a way out” (Taylor, 2007, p. 651). So it is that, by moving with Jesus “beyond life,” it becomes possible to return and “nourish the fullness of life of those who remain on this side of the barrier” (Taylor, 2011a, p. 174). This suggests

⁴ For a possible source of Taylor’s idea of Judaeo-Christian theism, see Vacherot (1884, pp. 227–250).

that Taylor believes redemption is available for people with non- and perhaps even anti-Christian beliefs. In fact, in one of his accounts of how we might overcome the assumption that certain moral imperatives are irreconcilable, he invokes Friedrich Nietzsche: “I still believe that we can and should struggle for a ‘transvaluation’ (to borrow Nietzsche’s term *Umwertung*) which could open the way to a mode of life, individual and social, in which these demands could be reconciled” (Taylor, 1994, p. 214). No surprise, then, that Taylor has come to say of Christianity that “It’s all about reconciliation between human beings, and it doesn’t simply mean within the Church, and it doesn’t mean that it’s conditioned on being within the Church” (Taylor, 2010, p. 320). Would he go even further and endorse the claim that God has chosen to redeem everyone? It would be fascinating to know. The idea has had an important history.⁵

But to return to the topic at hand, Taylor’s monism, being Christian, is philosophically unorthodox. To the orthodox monist, reason is sufficient for unity; it is enough, say, to conform to the correct ethical *theory*, whether the one favoured by virtue theorists or those of modern procedural ethics such as utilitarianism or Kantianism. While Taylor has committed himself to a political theory, as we’ll see below, he doesn’t consider it sufficient. Nor is practical reason, the “reasoning in transitions” that aims for no more than “epistemic gain” (Taylor, 1995, pp. 34–60, 1997), as powerful for Taylor as it is for, say, Hans-Georg Gadamer. To Gadamer, every interpretation of something intelligible posits an “anticipation of completeness” in a way that “assume[s] an immanent unity of meaning.” As Catherine Zuckert has said of this hermeneutics, “all ‘horizons’ or understandings can in principle be fused; there are no unbridgeable rifts or differences” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 294; Zuckert, 1996, p. 270). To Taylor, by contrast, we must accept that some cases of conflict are, at least for the time being, inherently irreconcilable (Taylor, 1985b, pp. 233, 235–236, 1989, pp. 502–503). So, even theoretical and practical reason combined is insufficient, which is why we also need faith (Taylor, 2005, 2011a, 2011b).

There is a non-monist alternative to all this, however, one that’s compatible with Christianity. According to it, the world is not only broken, so to speak, it may also be irreparable. This is why Martin Buber has declared: “Unity is not a property of the world but its task. To form unity out of the world is our never-ending work” (Buber, 1963, p. 30). The idea here is that we should see ourselves as, at best, travelling along a road that leads *towards* rather than *to* unity, since the destination — if there is one — may be beyond our reach. Perhaps we are indeed approaching, getting closer to it, but we cannot assume that it is, or even will be, possible to arrive.

Taylor, however, thinks that theoretical reason can help establish “islands” of unity in the human world. Presumably, this derives from his Christian belief that we can perfect ourselves through knowledge of God, the One (Matthew 5:48; Romans

⁵ Taylor himself asks about universal salvation when he writes:

Must there thus be damned, as well as saved? The question is whether this distinction between harmers and harmed is God’s last word, whether the transforming power can go farther, can chase the violence into its ultimate lair, and conquer it. (Taylor, 2007, pp. 670–671)

On the history of the idea, see Bauckham (1978).

1:19–21; 2 Timothy 3:15–17). “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*],” opens the Gospel of John, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” — declarations such as these are why so many Christians, despite their early struggles with paganism, have been able to adopt so much of ancient Greek philosophy, not least its transcendence of tragedy. They are why such a large number of the faithful have come to believe in the power of Jesus to heal them (Mark 1:40–41) and thereby make them almost “as clean as Christ on the cross” (Bergmann, 1990; Jaspers, 1952, pp. 36–40).

So, Taylor clearly doesn’t limit the role of theory to the natural sciences. On the contrary, he thinks ethical theory ought to be applied to practice — and, if necessary, enforced. To me, by contrast, ethical theories should be seen as, at best, fantastical utopian visions. True, when inspired and so creative they may bring original perspectives that can contribute to our never-quite-unified practical reasoning. But only if they remain subsumed under it. Taylor wouldn’t accept this restriction, at least not always, which is why he has gone no further than warning that our moral lives cannot be “adequately captured in a code,” that we need to avoid becoming “*totally invested*” in one (Taylor, 2007, pp. 704, 743, my italics; see also Taylor, 2011a).

I believe this to be counterproductive because Procrustean. As Theodor W. Adorno has put the point: “The unity of *logos*, because it mutilates, is enmeshed in the nexus of its guilt” (Adorno, 1997, p. 186). To which I would add: Those who fail to heed the limits of reason, will only increase them. Taylor is aware of the dangers here; indeed, he has at times been extremely articulate about them. But he still seems to think that, if there is a problem, then it is no more than a case of too much of a good (theoretical) thing.

3. Practical Implications

Whence the theory of “open secularism” that Taylor has developed with Jocelyn Maclure, which they recommend for its ability to “aid us in regulating the ethical and political conflicts associated with managing the moral and religious diversity of contemporary societies” (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, p. 41). The assumption that these are things that can be regulated goes well with Taylor’s characterization of such societies as marked by deep diversity. As we’ve seen, while the idea has room for irreducible differences, it excludes the irreconcilable ones, which run much deeper and would make regulation impossible. Maclure and Taylor elide this distinction when they invoke John Rawls’ “reasonable” pluralism on the very same page as Berlin’s value pluralism, clearly considering the one to harmonize fully with the other (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, p. 10). But the former is actually a form of monism, as is evident in the Rawlsian belief, explicitly endorsed by Maclure and Taylor, that people can “come together” on the basis of an “overlapping consensus,” that it’s possible to base “the unity of the political community on the adherence of citizens to common political principles” (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, pp. 15, 17).

This monism is also reflected in Maclure and Taylor’s claim that the state should be neutral, which they present as “one of the modalities of the system of governance allowing democratic and liberal states to grant equal respect to individuals with different worldviews and sets of values” (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, p. 19). Evidently, by “system” they mean *systematically unified*, something which, it’s worth noting, also

happens to be a requirement of the rulebooks of sports and games. Because if their officials are to referee neutrally, they must be able to rely upon rules that are free of contradiction; otherwise, there would be no way to avoid violating not merely the neutrality of effect (which is in any case impossible, since one set of rules will always favour some players, given their talents, over others) but also the neutrality of intent, which is considered essential. A contradictory rulebook would require referees to bend or even ignore some rule or other in order to make given rulings, and there is simply no way to do this while remaining neutral. Maclure and Taylor claim to be aware that their theory's constitutive principles may come into conflict, that tensions can arise such that compromises will have to be made, but they still recommend their preferred secularist regime to us as the one that, when all the "dilemmas are resolved," manages to reach the "optimal balance," that is, to achieve "reconciliation," and to do so in a way that avoids compromising its basic principle of equal respect. So when it comes to the fundamentals, they assume that their theory, and the regime it supports, can remain clean, free of compromise (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, pp. 27, 34).⁶

But why does Taylor call for a separation between church and state — a direct implication of his open secularism — though not between nation and state, which he's long argued against in his support for constitutional recognition of Quebec's distinctiveness (Taylor, 1993, 1995, pp. 225–256)? Indeed, this recognition has purportedly come to pass, since a clause within Quebec's Bill 96 (2022) appears to have amended Canada's *Constitution Act, 1867* by adding a section (90Q.1) which declares that "Quebecers form a nation." To me, however, the nation in question is formed not by Quebecers, the citizens of Quebec, but by those who comprise its majority nation, that is, francophone Quebecers or Québécois. Because neither Quebec nor Canada are nations; on the contrary, they are civic or political communities that also happen to contain multiple nations, making their states multinational. So the amendment fails to establish a direct "recognition-link" between the Canadian state and the Québécois nation, since the link is asserted only via the Quebec state — making it the only state that directly recognizes the nation. Because of this, Québécois nationalists have no reason to reconsider their continuing calls for decentralizing power from the Canadian to the Quebec state (even up to the sovereignty of the latter). Only if both the Canadian and Quebec states directly recognized the Québécois nation could these nationalists seriously entertain the question of which of the two states should be granted which areas of jurisdiction in order to better serve their nation (Blattberg, 2009, pp. 76–90).

Regardless of one's position on this matter, the initial question remains: Why is Taylor willing to abandon neutrality when it comes to a national community's needs but not when it comes to those of a religious community? To be clear, I am not suggesting that we should go to the opposite extreme and bring about an established church. Still, a religiously neutral state is in its own way extreme — when, that is, we fully grasp its implications.

The problem has to do with the very idea of approaching the question of religion and politics neutrally. To see why, consider the often-overlooked difference between

⁶ They do, however, admit that their state's neutrality is not "complete" (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, p. 16). For the distinction between the two kinds of neutrality, see Rawls (2005, pp. 191–195). I first pointed out how neutrality depends upon the rules or principles being systematically unified in Blattberg (2003, p. 13).

“state neutrality towards religions,” on the one hand, and “the religious neutrality of the state,” on the other. Suppose I find myself in a room with a group of people of different religious persuasions, which is evident in the different religious symbols they wear. If I wanted to, I could express my neutrality towards them by wearing all of their religious symbols — but this would be unfair to the secular person who also happens to be present. Yet if I choose to wear no symbol, then my dress would be like that of the secular, and this would be unfair to the religious. So, if I am to be neutral towards the religious as well as towards those who decline religion — if, that is, I am to assert my “religious neutrality” and so acknowledge what Taylor has called “secularity 3,” the widespread condition in which belief or disbelief in God are each options among others (Taylor, 2007, pp. 2–4, 12–15) — then I would have to wear something that sets me apart from all of them. A uniform, say. And that is why, if what we want is a religiously neutral state, then we should be calling on all those who represent it to wear this uniform.

What kind of uniform? Here is a possibility. In 1920, in Arizona, a referee during a football match was mistaken for a player and received a pass. After the game, he turned to a friend who owned a sporting goods store: “Could you,” he asked, “make me a jersey that would clearly mark me from the players?” Thus was born the striped jersey worn by referees today. Which leads me to suggest that, if the religious neutrality of the state is really our desire, then we should insist that all who embody this neutrality wear the jersey. After all, Rawls himself furthered the idea of justice as fairness when he wrote in his *A Theory of Justice*:

In much the same way that players have the shared end to execute a good and fair play of the game, so the members of a well-ordered society have the common aim of cooperating together to realize their own and another’s nature in ways allowed by the principles of justice. (Rawls, 1999, p. 462)

Then again, perhaps this is a good reason to reject the religious neutrality of the state.

The failure to see that — unless one requires the wearing of uniforms — religious neutrality is actually biased against the religious goes back to Hugo Grotius, the 17th century Dutch jurist who helped found modern international law. Despite being a pious Protestant, Grotius asserted that the new discipline should be developed “even if God were not given” (*etsi Deus non daretur*), which corresponds to what has been called a “methodological atheism” (Berger, 2014, pp. x, 47). To Grotius, this was the only way the law could work in a world of states that adhered to different religions.

But there is another way, one based on a distinction between different forms of conflict resolution that Taylor, among others, fails to make: between accommodation as the goal of negotiation, on the one hand, and reconciliation as the goal of conversation, on the other. When we negotiate, in good faith at least, we’re called upon to make concessions and so give up something of value. Taylor, however, assumes that his and MacLure’s theory establishes the “reasonable” limits of accommodation in a way that implies we can accommodate without compromising and so dirtying our hands. But this is a monist assumption, as we’ve seen, and in order to overcome it we must once again recognize that there are times when values in conflict are not only irreducible but also irreconcilable. The distinction, albeit in a blurry form, is actually present in the final chapter of the book Taylor wrote with the pluralist philosopher

Hubert L. Dreyfus (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015, pp. 155–156, 159). As we might expect of a work produced by a monist and a pluralist, it affirms an agnostic position that is neither one nor the other. Nor is it something in-between, which happens to be my position.

It would have us move “towards One, as many,” something we can do in politics only if we remain sensitive to the differences between negotiating accommodations and conversing about reconciliations. For one thing, there is no place in a conversation for interlocutors to put pressure on each other; on the contrary, they must listen with open minds in the hopes of transforming, rather than compromising, their values. Only this way can they possibly reconcile them and so produce a genuinely win-win outcome for all concerned. Such listening is extremely difficult, however, especially when one party is willing to do no more than negotiate in good faith. Because negotiation is an inherently adversarial, and so zero-sum, mode of conflict resolution. And when one feels threatened by the need to “surrender something special” (Breeding Ground, 1986), it becomes virtually impossible to keep an open mind. All of which is to say that conversation is an extremely fragile affair, which is why we need to be careful not to conflate it with negotiation (Blattberg, 2000).

Let me offer an example of what such a conversation might look like. Dare I suggest that Muslims in Canada today might have something to teach the rest of us about what it means to dress modestly? While legitimate concerns have been raised about the wearing of the niqab or burqa by (a very small minority of) Muslim women, as the father of a girl, I must say that I have found the hypersexualization of young women in our society to be not a little disconcerting. Which is why it seems to me that if all we ever concern ourselves with is the question of how much these Muslim garments should be accommodated by our public institutions, we miss an opportunity to open a sorely needed conversation about the function and value of modesty. Rather than beginning with the question of accommodation, then, we should try to learn from each other. Immigrants bring new cultures, new perspectives — not all of them are good, of course, but we will never know if we never ask.

Of course, this means we must also avoid going to the opposite extreme, which is what would come from accepting the political theorist Arash Abizadeh’s argument that any concern for the way public or parapublic workers dress is based on a “medieval logic” that succumbs to “an essentially totalitarian temptation” (Abizadeh, 2016, p. 41, my translation). For there is a very good reason why teachers of his subject, say, should be allowed to give lectures while wearing religious symbols but not political party pins. Parties in a democracy are necessarily partisan, since they participate in competitive elections that produce winners and losers, while religious believers or atheists consistently aim, at least in principle, for the common good of all. Determining what is appropriate in such cases, then, means drawing lines that are both flexible and dotted — lines, we might say, that represent the places where our thinking must start rather than stop.

This requires conversations that rely on a form of judgement that is *impartial* rather than neutral.⁷ Impartiality comes from practical reasoning that treats different

⁷ The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement similarly distinguishes between the two, though it aims to uphold both simultaneously. Regarding impartiality: “It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of

views or opinions in terms of the whole, rather than the parts, that is the common good. It recognizes that the common good can be fulfilled only when we manage to reconcile our conflicts, and that reconciliation is possible, when it is possible, because the common good constitutes an “organic” whole that is present in each of its parts. This is why, when some of those parts conflict, the whole can be reconceived in a way that integrates and so reconciles them. But it is just because the whole is not unified that we’re occasionally confronted by conflicts over it in the first place, and it is for the very same reason that we must accept that reconciliation will sometimes be beyond our reach. Sometimes, struggling for “damage control” through accommodation is indeed the best we can do.

Impartiality and the attempt to reconcile should nevertheless (almost) always come first; while neutrality should, if at all, come last. As Taylor has written, however, we need to embrace “the neutrality of the state,” for it

can be neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jewish; but by the same token it should also be neither Marxist, nor Kantian, nor Utilitarian. Of course, the democratic state will end up voting laws which (in the best case) reflect the actual convictions of its citizens, which will be either Christian, or Muslim, etc, through the whole gamut of views held in a modern society. But the decisions can’t be framed in a way which gives special recognition to one of these views. This is not easy to do; the lines are hard to draw; and they must always be drawn anew. But such is the nature of the enterprise which is the modern secular state. And what better alternative is there for diverse democracies? (Taylor, 2008)

This reminds me of a question that Taylor and Gérard Bouchard pose in the report on reasonable accommodations that they produced for the Quebec government in 2008. It asks whether a Muslim respondent could assume that they would be treated fairly by a Jewish judge wearing a kippah or a Hindu judge displaying a tilak (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 151).⁸

I would reply with another question: Do the authors imagine that the respondent would prefer the judge not to be transparent? It seems to me that if someone doubts the impartiality of a Jewish judge because they wear a kippah, then they will have no less reason to doubt a Christian judge who wears a non-ostentatious cross or, for that matter, a Jewish one who has replaced his regular kippah with a smaller, non-ostentatious one — to say nothing of a Jew, Christian, or Hindu who chooses to hide their religious persuasions by removing their religious symbols altogether. It is part and parcel of the job description of judges that they have good judgement; why, then,

individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.” And regarding neutrality: “In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature” (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 2006, p. 5). Note that, ironically, “Until 2006, Magen David Adom was denied membership in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement since it had refused to replace its red Star of David emblem with a pre-approved symbol” (Wikipedia, 2023).

⁸ To his credit, Taylor (2017) has changed his position: he no longer thinks that judges and police officers who exercise the coercive functions of the state should be prevented from wearing religious symbols. Nevertheless, the question at hand still seems to me to follow logically from his neutralism.

not trust that they will recuse themselves from cases where their impartiality has been legitimately questioned? Even if Peter Cook's judge is indeed wrong that this is "entirely a matter for you," the fact remains that Canadian judges have long been in the habit of citing major philosophers and theologians when interpreting the law (Cook, 1979; McCormack, 2017). And if a law or its interpretation draws on the ideas of a particular thinker, why hide it? Consider the laws that Bouchard and Taylor hoped would emerge from the list of 37 recommendations contained at the end of their report — why should it be only implicit that they conform to a version of Rawlsian "political" liberalism? Was Jesus (or should I say "someone"?) mistaken when he declared that "the truth shall set you free"?

4. Conclusion

All of the above leads me to want to raise two main concerns with Taylor's approach. The first is that it encourages an "aestheticization" of politics, as in the parallels with sports or games or the reference to fantastical utopias invoked above. To declare the state neutral is a form of gamification, since it implies that politics is to be played — fairly, of course, but played nonetheless — and play has had a central role in aesthetics since at least Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller. Whenever an activity is governed by systematically unified rules or principles and these are considered good not for some practical purpose but for their own sakes, then you can be sure it consists of playing a game of one form or another. Play is also relevant to fantasizing, which comes not from imagining practically, as when we aim to reflect some reality by empathizing with someone, but from letting our imaginations run free, and from doing so for its own sake.

Aestheticization of a different sort has already been undergone by the Crown. I'm referring not only to how it has largely become a symbol, a figurehead that rules strictly when called on to step into the breach and decide on an exception, since I also want to highlight how much has changed since the time when the Royal Prerogative was understood as exercised on the basis of divine inspiration — when the monarch ruled *Dei gratia* ("by the grace of God"), as Canada's coins still declare. Today's monarch has been transformed: from a sovereign who, the claim went, had two bodies, one natural and the other spiritual, into a mere celebrity, someone "known for his well-knownness," to invoke Daniel J. Boorstin's definition (Boorstin, 2012, p. 217; see also Blain & O'Donnell, 2003, Chapters 9–10; Kantorowicz, 1957). This is aesthetics in the spectacle mode, and it too relies on the disinterested attitude that comes from affirming something as a "self-enclosed unity," be it fame for its own sake, systematically unified rules adopted for their own sake, or imagining for its own sake. The Crown can thus be understood to have undergone the first two of these forms of aestheticization given its role as head of state and as neutral referee in the system. For the King's powers "are largely symbolic and ceremonial. He remains politically neutral" (Clarke, 2024; see also Smith, 2013, pp. 85, 125, 129). It is worth noting that MacLure and Taylor are willing to admit this Crown into their theory's regime (MacLure & Taylor, 2011, p. 26). It is also clear, however, that they would give the last word to the theory rather than to the Crown. For they are still, in their own way, mono-archists.

This theory-driven aestheticization can be dangerous not only because it is unrealistic, but also because of the damage it can do to the values involved. By incorporating them into an abstract scheme, it saps their ability to motivate us to uphold them. Taylor has written very insightfully about the challenge of providing the moral sources necessary for sustaining initiatives such as humanitarian aid, those that power solidarity and altruism on a global scale. One source derives from our need to maintain our self-image as upholding the idea of a decent, civilized human life. Another consists of the imperative to respect human dignity. And a third takes the form of our feelings of indignation at injustice. Taylor is nevertheless aware of how fragile these motivations can be, of how they are subject to shifting fashions, and of how the failure to realize them can breed disappointment so deep that it leads to hatred, even misanthropy (Taylor, 1989, pp. 513–518, 2007, pp. 692–703).

But notice how he sums up this whole discussion: he describes it as “the issue of the deeper motivation needed to carry through on the code” (Taylor, 2007, p. 703). And though — or rather, because — he goes on to argue that all ethical life cannot be adequately captured in a code, he fails to appreciate how the very idea of codes, or theories, is a big part of the problem. Because ethical theory aestheticizes; it encourages, indeed requires, the disinterested or for-its-own-sake stance, and this only “unplugs” us from our moral sources. It’s not for nothing that Søren Kierkegaard (1987, p. 80) portrayed the aesthete as whimsical and fickle.⁹

Like most people, Taylor tends to limit the aesthetic to the appreciation of beauty, especially of art. But this leads him to miss its other modes — not only those of spectacles and fun games but also fantasies. That is why I agree with Jason Å. Josephson-Storm (2017, 2019) that our age is actually far more “enchanted” than Taylor and others allow. To be sure, animism has declined; we no longer feel threatened by magic, spirits, and demons. But other fantastical phenomena, New Age and paranormal, UFO and astrological, are far from unpopular. Nor should we ignore the attraction of many, including especially intellectuals, to systematically unified theories, be they of fantastical conspiracies or, as we’ve seen, of political justice as a fair game. And if Rawls is not to your taste, there’s always Hannah Arendt and her followers, who urge us to see political action as spectacle and political judgement as modelled on the appreciation of beauty. Needless to say, all this has also been accompanied by the rise of “post-truth” and comparable urgings far outside of politics (Blattberg, 2019, 2021b, 2022, 2024).

As for my second concern with Taylor’s approach, it strikes me as no less tragically ironic than the first. For despite its self-described openness, Maclure and Taylor’s secularism is in fact closed to everyone who fails to conform to the ostensibly unified system it embodies. And when those who do not fit in are neutralized, talk of diversity must be seen as more shallow than deep.¹⁰ This is why Jean-Jacques Rousseau seems to me to have exaggerated only slightly when, in 1750, he wrote that “Today, when

⁹ For the argument that Kierkegaard’s conception of ethical life, which consists of playing a role within a systematically unified social context, is no less aesthetic, see Blattberg (2020a). And for how talk of human rights can be seen as another example of demotivating aestheticization, see Blattberg (2009, pp. 43–59).

¹⁰ Above all, I base this complaint on the worry that religious lives (like those of Jews, as mentioned above) that are lived in a way that emphasizes practice over belief tend to be excluded from Maclure and Taylor’s highly Protestant understanding of religion (Laborde, 2020).

more subtle inquiries and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to established rules, a vile and deceitful uniformity reigns in our mores, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold” (Rousseau, 2011, p. 7). Because it is “from Athens [that] came those astonishing works that will serve as models in every corrupt age” (Rousseau, 2011, p. 11).

To which I would add: Doesn’t the imposition of unity tend to bring the opposite, that is, division and fragmentation? And doesn’t this often make way for populist demagoguery? Consider that when issues around immigration are approached in terms of reasonable accommodations, people end up conceiving of immigrants as a potential threat to their society’s values. This contributes to the real malaise already present among the citizenry, a feeling of alienation borne of the impression that we’ve lost control over how the state makes and applies its laws. And one source of this impression is none other than the theories underlying frameworks for reasonable accommodations. For they end up awarding immense power to lawyers, judges, and bureaucrats — experts charged with regulating the issues around diversity by applying a complex test, “a multifaceted, four-step analytical process,” as the professor of public law Noura Karazivan has described it. Karazivan adds: “It is true that this test is complicated and may prove difficult to apply. But such is the case with most analytical frameworks devised by courts to bring law to life, to bring law to ‘everyday use’” (Karazivan, 2014).

These words don’t serve to defend the neutralist position; on the contrary, they illustrate the problem. If elites continue to send ordinary people the message that either they accept what the framework for accommodations requires or they are unreasonable — or, worse, they are racist — and if this is done here in Quebec, a province where citizens are especially sensitive to the importance of being *maîtres chez nous*, then it will only give ideas to demagogic politicians such as the ones behind the (so-called) Charter of Quebec Values or the Quebec Laicity Act (Government of Quebec, 2013, 2019). “If you’re tired of being told how you must accommodate immigrants and symbol-wearing religious believers,” they may be interpreted as having said, “then vote for us and there will be no more accommodations!” However, issues arising from situations of truly deep diversity often do require a willingness to accommodate. And sometimes we can do better. Sometimes we must do better.

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