An Interview with Charles Taylor on Faith, Philosophy, and Politics

Daniel Blaikie; Concordia University, Montreal QC, Canada

This interview was conducted over two sittings, on October 21, 2009 and January 8, 2010 respectively. What appears below is a reproduction of the interview through notes on the first session, and a recording of the second. I would like to thank Professor Taylor for his understanding of the technological problems that occurred during the first sitting, as well as for taking the time to meet twice and review those sections of the interview not transcribed from a recording. I would also like to thank my wife, Janelle, for listening to the recording, and reviewing the transcribed sections. --DB

1. DB: Referring to Isaiah Berlin’s “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” you have counted yourself a philosophical hedgehog, relating everything back to one central insight or system as opposed to pursuing disparate projects in their own terms and without asking how they relate to each other.

In the introduction to your Philosophical Papers that insight was characterized in a largely negative way, as being that naturalism fundamentally misconstrues the human condition. Since then, you have gone some way in elaborating the positive side of your project.

How would you say the central insight animating your work has developed through its various rearticulations since it first began to suggest itself to you, and how would you describe it today?

CT: There has been a central theme or insight driving my work, though it’s difficult to sum up in a single phrase or sentence. What characterizes my work is its being a philosophical anthropology. What I mean by that is my work begins with seeing humans as purposive, self-interpreting beings, with a sense of what is important to them which they have to strive to articulate. This approach resists reductionism to the extent that people understand themselves in a number of different ways, and there seems no reason to say a priori that this or that one set of terms will provide the best means to express any given person’s most perspicuous self-understanding.
What I have noticed in any number of disciplines, whether economics, sociology, psychology or what have you, is the tendency to lock on to one particular feature of humanity, or a particular analytical framework – I’m thinking here of, for example, mechanism, the means of production, rational choice theory and so on – and then try to reduce and explain everything in those terms. A large part of my work has been committed to challenging various of these reductionist frameworks, and trying to pinpoint the deficiencies of particular ones; that is, where a particular reduction theory comes up short in describing the human experience because of its need to work everything into one way of looking at things.

I would like to do more work on the positive project, which I think has at least two parts. The first is developing an understanding of language that shows just how crucial it is to understanding human culture. To be a language-being involves much more than simply being an efficient communicator. Initiation into a linguistic community really is the opening up of a whole new world, one which provides new kinds of meaning. These meanings are characterized by the fact that they are challengeable; that is, people can be asked to expand upon or clarify the meaning of what they have said, or one can disagree with a person as to whether or not the language they are using is appropriate to the phenomenon they are trying to describe. This doesn’t mean that a person will be able to answer any question that is put to them, but they will at least be able to understand the question. This whole question of how to understand the nature of language and language beings is something I would like to write a book about sometime soon.

The second component to my positive project is the historical dimension, and this is something I’ve been able to develop more fully in *Sources of the Self* and in my work since then. This is the question of what in a human being or human society changes over time and what stays the same. It is also of course tied to the question of what kinds of things remain the same across cultures and where differences arise.

2. DB: To go back to the negative formulation of the central insight for a moment, in *Sources of the Self* you coined the term hypergood, seemingly to diagnose a tendency in the modern self toward a kind of moral reductionism that can be, but need not always be, related to the naturalist attitude.
The term does not appear in your subsequent work, where the main conceptual tools of analysis shift from those more familiar to traditional moral philosophy to that of the social imaginary.

This shift raises two sets of questions. (i) The first is what, generally speaking, you take the significance of this shift to be, or what questions or issues the concept of social imaginary allows you to explore that the more straightforwardly moral language did not.

(ii) The second question is whether one can accept an analysis of modernity in terms of the concept of social imaginary without commitment to the substantive philosophical claim that reductive accounts in the human sciences are inadequate in principle.

CT: The short answer to the second question is ‘no’. The concept of a social imaginary is inherently anti-reductive. Part of that is because it is an essentially social concept, both in the sense that its object is social and in the sense that it is shared. The object is social insofar as fleshing out a social imaginary for a given society involves giving an account of what counts as our social life, what kinds of practices constitute that society, including what kinds of things count as right or wrong, or how our political or economic systems should be set up.

An example of this is the practice of voting. While it makes perfect sense in a society which places a heavy emphasis on the diversity of individual interests, in communities that value agreement by consensus, where either the elders or everyone in society is called work through their difference, sometimes by very long periods of discussion, simply introducing a majority decision making procedure could have quite destructive consequences. You need a background understanding about a whole range of issues in order for the practice of voting to make sense. This background is what the idea of a society’s social imaginary tries to capture. In this sense, there won’t be a sharp division between moral language and the language of the social imaginary. The latter encompasses the former.
The raw materials for developing an account of a social imaginary are the practices of a given society. The goal is to try to explain what the significance of those practices is and how they came to develop. So the question becomes: What changes in understanding do you have to attribute to a people in order to be able to make sense of the development of their practices? The issue becomes a little more complex in that a society’s way of understanding itself, the account that it provides of its own practices, is itself a practice to made sense of. So it can be misleading to say that the practices are the raw material and the constructed social imaginary the theory. But I think this is one of the virtues of talking about social imaginaries rather than theories. The social imaginary is more complex in some ways, but it should also do a better job of describing what it is like to inhabit a given society, of exposing how the logic of a society’s common sense ways of thinking.

3. DB: Excepting Ruth Abbey, the secondary literature is virtually unanimous in attributing to you the claim that each individual, at least in modern societies, necessarily has a hypergood, and this is sometimes developed into a criticism of your work either by pointing to an apparently unresolved tension between the rigid priority of hypergoods on the one hand, and your professed plurality with respect to the good on the other, or by claiming that you do not see the need to resolve that tension because you believe that, through a series of ad hominem arguments and error-reducing moves, humanity will eventually reconcile the diversity of goods into one overarching hypergood.

Do you think that hypergoods are a necessary or contingent feature of the human experience? And how do you think we can confer the status of “hypergood” on one good in particular without jeopardizing the kind of plurality with respect to the good that you so often advocate in your work?

CT: The answer is either yes or no depending . . . and again, this is an unclarity in the concept that I use, depending on how you define it. If you think of it as an answer to the question: How do people resolve conflicts when they feel called upon to go this way and go that way by something they hold very strongly? And if you think of it just as the answer to that, whatever that answer is, then we always have one. But sometimes what
they use to resolve that is precisely some kind of idea of bringing all the goods together in some kind of coherent form taking account of their relative importance.

I think arguably that is what Aristotle is talking about. To connect this up with the Aristotle debate, he talks at various points about the highest good, *teleion agathon* . . . and he talks as though this could be a single one, because he says, you know, there are many; which is the higher?; which is the highest? and so on. So you could think that he’s looking at a single good as the one that knocks all the others off their perch. But if you actually look at the practice as I read it, I mean of course, this is of course, basically controversial, but if you look at Aristotle’s practice, as I want to read it, it’s rather that he has this idea of how you have a single life, you’ve got to fit it all together in a single life, taking into account of course the fact that some are in some sense higher than others, that you can’t simply knock out the ones that are not higher . . . they have some relative position that ought to be respected. So then, the hypergood of Aristotle is this idea of the good life as the proper mix of goods . . . If you define it narrowly as it’s got to be what you think is the single good that knocks all the others off, then yes, its something, not everyone has a hypergood. If you want to take it in, as the answer to the question how do people resolve their conflicts, then it doesn’t have to be a single good it can be some idea of fitting them all together, which I think has a lot to be said for. And, incidentally, that’s how I read Aristotle.

DB: So if someone were to say of you that there’s an overarching hypergood underlying your work, it would be this notion of balancing? And so would you say then that there’s a moral imperative to try to strike this kind of balance, either in individual life or in the life of a society?

CT: Ya, right. I mean, get the balance right, exactly. And that’s how I read Aristotle and that’s, I think, the right way of looking at it.

4. DB: If an appreciation of the complexity of the human condition is needed to enrich our theoretical understanding of ourselves, then what is the relation of this insight to our
practical lives? In other words, how do you think the anti-reductionist lessons of your work can be incorporated into people’s personal and political lives?

And further, has your involvement in politics, both at the partisan level as a member, and former candidate for the NDP, as well as at the non-partisan level, most recently as one of the commissioners of the Commission de Consultation sur les Pratiques d’Acommodement Reliées aux Différences Culturelles, made you more or less hopeful that political dialogue could become more nuanced and less polarized?

CT: For me practice has informed the theory as much or more than the other way around. Talking about politics in terms of social imaginaries allows one to get at a level of description that one cannot otherwise attain. In part because, if it’s done well, it introduces directly into the conversation the concrete ways of thinking about an issue that the people in that society actually do endorse. In a purely abstract normative undertaking, like Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* for example, the prescriptions that come out of that kind of intellectual effort are going to be suited to people who are ideal in some sense, whether rationally, morally, or whatever. In actual fact, people require a sense of solidarity with others in order to motivate them to participate in initiatives that involve sacrifice on their part, like the redistribution of wealth.

Whereas abstract normative theories are unable to engage the further question of what in the particular case is actually doing the work of forging and sustaining the sense of solidarity required to pull off the normative prescriptions, explaining a society in terms of its social imaginary demands this. In examining the self-understandings constitutive of the society and its practices, we are at the same time discovering the roots of the sense of solidarity that holds that society together.

What this approach allows, then, is to go beyond a merely normative project, in the sense of responding to the question of what, ideally, would be the case. The ‘beyond’ in this sense is the place where a description of the actual basis of political solidarity informs the normative prescriptions we make so that we are able to see the real options, the directions that are really open for us to take. It suggests, for example, that the road Canada will have to take in order to keep Quebec within the Canadian project is a
different road than that which will have to be taken toward the same end with respect to the First Nations in Canada. That’s not to say that these roads will be mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is only by identifying what in their respective identities calls out for recognition that we will be able to find ways forward that are acceptable to all parties. This does not require that the way forward on these issues has to fit exactly the present social imaginary for all of these groups, but if we are to progress, then we have to know where we stand today and what the real avenues of development are for these various social imaginaries, in order to be able to identify points of convergence that can be worked toward.

I would say that one of the great benefits of having been actively involved in politics is that it helps put in evidence the real reasons for which various groups feel alienated from the larger political community, and therefore what the real barriers are to building a wider sense of solidarity within the political community. In that sense my involvement in politics has directly fed my intellectual pursuits by revealing the extent to which theory can become disjunctive with the real world if one is not always asking how the actors in a given political context understand themselves and their own actions.

5. DB: In the present debate about faith and politics, much is made of the need for bodies politic to “deal” with different religious views. Do you think there is a positive opportunity, masked by the framing of the debate, for politics not just to accommodate, but to learn from the various faith communities within the larger political community?

CT: Yes, I think there is such an opportunity. It’s important to realize that given the way the economies of Western democracies have developed they are no longer anywhere near being culturally homogeneous centers, and there is no going back on this. Western democracies cannot ignore the question of how to develop into even-handed multicultural societies because there simply is no choice.

One of the things that a successful multicultural society requires is mutual comprehension. One of the things that became clear to me in the course of my work on the commission was the extent to which there is a palpable fear on the part of some people in society that immigrants are going to completely transform society, and destroy
our way of life. In fact, this fear can lead to a veritable panic in some people, and the fear is largely a product of ignorance.

Where the ecumenical movement shows promise is in its ability to take people who take their religious commitments very seriously and have them engage with people who are just as serious about their faith, but who come from a different religious tradition. Their respective religious feelings are not being watered down at all, but there is nevertheless a commitment to mutual understanding, not by assimilating the one to the other, but by conducting a meaningful exploration of the differences between them as well as the similarities.

6. DB: For all the challenges in the contemporary public discourse around the question of religion and politics, people at least seem to understand why a person’s religious convictions are deeply important to them and why those convictions might influence a person’s stance on certain political issues.

In the case of philosophy, however, there does not seem to be a like understanding of the importance of a person’s philosophical commitments to their politics, nor more generally of the relevance of philosophical questions to practical life.

In what ways do think philosophy itself may have contributed to this disconnect and how do you think it might be overcome?

CT: Unfortunately, I think a fair bit of philosophy’s current image stems from, not quite a doctrine, but at least a stance that was taken by most Anglo-Saxon philosophers in the interwar or postwar period in the twentieth century. This stance rested on a sharp division between the empirical sciences on the one hand, and the work of conceptual clarification on the other. Philosophy was understood to be an undertaking of the latter kind and it was thought that one could and should take a cool, scientific attitude to the discipline and refrain as much as possible from introducing controversial political or moral claims into philosophical work.

Thus it came about that moral and political philosophy was treated less and less by analytic philosophers. I say analytic because the same phenomenon didn’t reproduce itself in the Continental tradition, and this in part contributed to their divide. Say what
you will about Sartre’s work, whether you agree with him or not, his work clearly has import for moral and political questions.

This is why Rawls’ work was so successfully received in the 1970’s. I think there was a sense that this total dissociation of philosophy and moral and political questions was somewhat scandalous and Rawls’ work was a conscious attempt to change the culture and reawaken social and political themes within the analytic tradition.

Though Rawls was seen as the cure to the ill that had cut off political questions from analytic philosophy, and I do think that he was trying to remedy that divide, he nevertheless failed to completely overcome the problem. The idea that one could develop a kind of mathematical science for political questions harboured some pretty serious holdovers from the postwar conception of philosophy I mentioned earlier. The idea of developing a normative system that is indifferent to the question of what grounds the solidarity requisite for political community just seems implausible to me. You end up in so many debates about how to define the original position, for instance about the extent or degree of risk adversity in those party to the original position, and all of this is really beside the point when it comes to real people and how they actually think of themselves, as well as how to actually create an actual community with the moral resources, or the sense of solidarity, necessary to implement a redistributive program.

I recall flabbergasting some of my American colleagues when, shortly after the doctors strike in Ontario, I asked them what the difference principle would prescribe as a solution to the problem. The problem was that Ontario doctors were threatening to pick up and leave en masse unless they were paid more for their work. Now, the assumption of Rawls’ theory is that there is a social science answer to this question. But not only is it unrealistic to think that the doctors will set aside their interests and ask what social scientists would calculate as their gross worth to society, it also misses the point that the doctors were in the process of negotiating their worth. The question of their worth was up for grabs, so suggesting that we should all defer to a sociologist or economist would miss the political point of the dispute.
DB: And sometimes these professional conflicts are as much about identity issues as they are about the money.

CT: Well, yes, exactly. And it’s not clear what, if anything, the difference principle has to say in circumstances like that.

In fairness, though, I think Rawls’ himself began to see this point and his views began to change over time. Although one of the endearing traits of John Rawls was that he was never quite willing to admit that his views had changed.

One of the things that I have tried to do in my work is to move away from the abstract normative enterprise, in the hope that doing so will not only provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena but also display the relevance of philosophy to the social and political world.

7. DB: R. G. Collingwood wrote that philosophy: “has this peculiarity . . . the theory of philosophy is itself a problem for philosophy; and not only a possible problem, but an inevitable problem, one which sooner or later it is bound to raise.”

As someone who has spent a lot of time studying the philosophy of others and propounding your own, what do you take the object and purpose of philosophical inquiry to be?

CT: Well, the object, there isn’t one in a certain sense. The purpose is, I mean, necessarily vaguely put, the purpose is to look into and try to resolve the deepest foundational, conceptual, etcetera issues of any given matter. So, if it’s history, the philosophy of history, it’s to give a kind of a framework or sense in which any particular inquiry could take, if it’s philosophy of mathematics it’s whether numbers are real, if it’s philosophy of social science, etcetera there are all these questions. So when you do that kind of thing, the whole point of it, the whole nature of it is a turning. Asking, well, have I got the right term. Philosophy is going to do that to itself too, and the way in which you proceed to do that can also be challenged, right? . . . So Collingwood’s right, it’s going to turn on itself.
But the thing about it is that it doesn’t have a particular domain. So the difference between a physics and a chemistry department, or a history department or etcetera is that philosophy can’t be ranged alongside them in certain ways at all. Some people think that … particularly, indeed, in nursing today, people sometimes come up and say are you an ethicist? And the question is just, in a way, based on a very deep misunderstanding. You know, we have an anesthetist here, we have a dietician, I mean . . . it doesn’t work like that. No two agree! I hope that they have an idea of what they’re doing, but.

8. DB: In 1971 a collection of essays was released entitled Essays on the Left, wherein was an article of yours entitled “The Agony of Economic Man.” In it you called for a renewal of socialism and outlined some of the internal challenges to such a renewal. At the time you articulated the challenge as being that socialism was still tied to the self-image of humankind qua producer projected by capitalism, and that it was therefore unable to present a viable response people’s sense of alienation from economic society.

In today’s Canadian context, it seems difficult to identify a common image or vision that ties Canadian social democrats together. On the one hand, a number of the social equality priorities of the Canadian Left have been realized through the courts, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms provides at least as promising an avenue for future reform as traditional political organizing. On the other hand, many – if not most – of the traditional policy mechanisms that Canadian social democrats would have used to make the economy more responsive to the needs of humankind are political nonstarters, either because the government has surrendered its sovereignty over certain matters to international trade tribunals or because they are seen as the product of a failure to understand the efficiency of the market.

What do you think it means to say that one is a social democrat in 21st century Canada and what direction do you think that the movement should take in the years ahead?

CT: It’s difficult to answer that with a short sentence or slogan. But I would say that I think people who identify themselves as social democrats are people who have retained a
deep sense of dissatisfaction with the capitalist system and the way that it undermines self-rule and the solidarity of political communities.

One of the things I think has changed since the 1970’s, and even earlier, going all the way back to the language of the Regina Manifesto in 1933, and if you go back and read it that is very good stuff, and even further back to Marx, is that it used to be thought that there was a total answer to capitalism, that we could change in one system for another, completely different one. I don’t think that that option, if it ever seriously was, is on the table anymore. There is an extent to which markets are going to continue to play an important role in the economy and we have to accept that. We have to accept it not only as an empirical fact, but also because the consequences of trying to systematically eliminate markets from the economy will cause more harm than good.

So I think the social democratic movement is in a position of having to confront some very serious dilemmas, and they are dilemmas in that it’s really not clear that one horn is preferable to the other. On the one hand there are the demands of economic growth and individual freedom, which are genuine goods if promoted and secured in the right kind of ways. And on the other hand, there are the evils of capitalism and the unfettered market, among them: environmental destruction, the concentration of wealth, the undermining of political solidarity. We know the list, so I need not go on. These represent other goods that need to be pursued, and especially the environmental one. All the other issues pale in significance to the current threat to the planet, and as long as its causes are treated as externalities by the market, we are not going to see any improvement.

The challenge, then, for social democratic parties today is to try to find a creative way of balancing the two horns of the dilemma. We need to find a way to move forward on the social equality projects that build social solidarity, but without killing the golden goose, as it were.

Putting aside the question of its practical success, I was initially attracted by Tony Blair’s language of a Third Way. Although there is a bit of danger there too. It begins to sound as though one is offering a third total system as an alternative to free market capitalism on the one hand and a completely state-run economy on the other. What is really required is for social democratic parties, in their respective countries, to propose
policy solutions that are tailored to advance the goals of equality and environmental sustainability in their own particular context, without jeopardizing the economic viability of their country. While social democrats in different countries can learn from each other’s experiences we really do have to avoid a cookie-cutter approach to policy solutions.

9. DB: Even the most hardline utilitarians or deontologists would grant that humans do, as a matter of fact, recognize a number of goods as mattering to the choices they make in their lives. Positions that emphasize plurality with respect to the good are in a better position to explain this fact, and, in that respect, gain a certain plausibility over rival positions. Arguably, however, what they gain in descriptive power, they lose in normative force. One can often appeal to some good in order to justify the status quo, or to excuse what appears to others as a lack of moral will.

Do you think there is an inherent tendency toward conservatism in value pluralism, and if not, what do you think a politically radical value pluralist looks like?

CT: Well, things are politically radical in relation to the policies under which you’re operating, if people are going off in the wrong direction. You see, a case where, it’s obviously the case that you need a little more pluralism is cases like Bush’s war on Iraq, which got single minded about one big issue which is security, and securities and then freedom, and we are the free, so we [attack] and forget the collateral damage. But wait a minute, there are other things at stake here. Maybe you’re certainly right to stop these people from bombing the twin towers and making sure they don’t, but there are other things at stake here, such as respecting the integrity of other societies and their . . . you can make a whole list. And politics is a matter of seeing all these . . . as having value. So there are, they are in their own way very radical equations. You could say, you see, the radical here was in some sense Bush, right? But if you wanted to say, well, I mean progressive or good politics is plainly on the side of the non-monists here.

So I don’t think that these two, you know, reactionary versus conservatism . . . and monism versus pluralism line up in any kind of order. I mean, and again, you could say that the critique of capitalism is that it is so mono, single minded. Of course, what they do is they have an argument that all the other good things will spring from letting the
markets rip. We’ll all get richer and ya da ya da. So I mean, it’s not quite plurality there, but it is certainly a very single minded view on how you achieve the good, which tends to be . . . you have to be prepared to accept that there are big dilemmas here that are just overlooked, hiding under there, under some trickle down. So trickle down! It’ll get fixed, so you see, well there’s nothing to be concerned about.

10.  DB: To close I would like to ask you about your own appreciation of your work. Is there any particular article, lecture, book, etc. that your are particularly proud of, or that stands out as having had the kind of impact, or perhaps the complete opposite impact, you had hoped it would have?

CT: I was quite surprised at the reception of *A Secular Age*. I thought, particularly because it really does put forward my own personal views on some matters, that it would probably be read and reviewed by a few experts. I did not expect the widespread reception that it got.

That aside, though, my work has tended to be read among much smaller groups of people. I think that’s in part because of the crossing over into other disciplines. This approach to the human sciences, I think, represents a minority view, although it may be gathering some steam. While this means that one may not always have as wide an audience as one might like, in the spirit of J.S. Mill, I would say that it means one has a better opportunity to clarify and sharpen up one’s own arguments. When one is within a majority view, the rightness of one’s view can seem quite obvious and this can lead to a tendency to just repeat what has already been said. So I guess the bright side of being in the minority is that you come to know your position better.