



# CHARLES TAYLOR

SECOND EDITION

Ruth Abbey



# Charles Taylor

Charles Taylor is one of the most influential and prolific philosophers in the English-speaking world. The breadth of his writings is unique, ranging from reflections on artificial intelligence to analyses of contemporary multicultural societies and the role of religion in modern western societies.

In this thought-provoking introduction to Taylor's work, Ruth Abbey outlines his ideas in a coherent and accessible way without unduly reducing their richness and depth. Taylor's reflections on the topics of epistemology, language, moral theory, selfhood, political theory, and religion form the core six chapters within the book. Retaining the thematic approach of the first edition, this second edition has been thoroughly revised, rewritten, and restructured.

An ideal companion to Taylor's ideas and arguments, *Charles Taylor* is essential reading for students of philosophy, religion, and political theory, and will be welcomed by the non-specialist looking for an authoritative guide to Taylor's large and challenging body of work.

**Ruth Abbey** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Swinburne University in Australia. She is the author of *Nietzsche's Middle Period*; *The Return of Feminist Liberalism*; and *Human All Too Human: A Critical Introduction and Guide*. She is the editor of *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Charles Taylor*; *Feminist Interpretations of John Rawls*; and *Cosmopolitan Civility*. She has published a number of articles and book chapters on topics ranging from contemporary liberalism to conceptions of marriage to animal ethics.



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# Charles Taylor

Second Edition

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Cover image: Charles Taylor, 2012. By Oleksandr Makhanets  
(CC BY-SA 3.0).

Second edition published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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First edition published by Acumen, 2000

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-11072-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-11068-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-21830-2 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003218302

Typeset in Joanna

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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## Preface to the Second Edition

This book has undergone a major overhaul since its first publication in 2000. The introduction has been revised, rewritten, and restructured to reflect the changes in the ensuing chapters, which now engage the major publications by Taylor that have appeared since the first edition. I have also imported some substantive material, such as that on naturalism and the scientific revolution, into the introduction to lay the groundwork for coming chapters. This material is relevant to all those chapters and so cannot be located in a single place.

Chapter 1 covers content from Chapter 4 in the first edition but has been completely rewritten to revolve around Dreyfus and Taylor's 2015 book, *Retrieving Realism*. Chapter 2 is a new chapter on language, based on Taylor's 2016 work, *The Language Animal*. I have also imported some material from the former Chapters 1 and 2 in the first edition that are relevant to language – the dialogical self (former Chapter 2), self-interpretation (former Chapter 2), and narration (former Chapter 1).

Chapter 3 covers the material that was in Chapter 1 in the first edition, but has been revised, re-ordered, and in some areas re-thought. Chapter 4 carries over material that was in Chapter 2 in the first edition, but it has been thoroughly overhauled and re-ordered. I have re-arranged the major points I draw from *Sources* and abbreviated their exposition. I have removed discussion of the ontological components of the self to focus on the historicist ones in this chapter. These ontological components are now discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 covers material that was in Chapter 3 in the first edition, but it has been completely rewritten and restructured. The previous framing around the liberal-communitarian debate has been dismantled and replaced with a focus on Taylor's thinking about democracy. Chapter 6 has been created to reflect the publication of *A Secular Age* in 2007 and Taylor's co-authored *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* in 2011.

## Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to the publishers for suggesting that a second edition of this book was needed and for inviting me to undertake it. It did need to be done, but without their encouragement I would not have done it.

I also thank the three anonymous reviewers of the proposal I submitted for this second edition. Their support for a second edition was very buoying and their suggestions excellent; I have incorporated as many of them as I am capable of. I also really appreciate the anonymous review of the final draft and their endorsement of the current work.

Since writing the first edition, I've had the good fortune to learn from a number of Taylor scholars such as Paolo Costa, Arto Laitinen, Michiel Meijer, and Nick Smith.

I remain indebted to Brad Thames for his continuing diligent and creative stewardship of the Taylor electronic bibliography. He does a great service for Taylor scholars.

Edie and Andre have been my constant companions during the writing of this revised edition.



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## Introduction

The very breadth of subject matter is . . . what will first strike the “Anglo-Saxon” philosopher. . . . It is the combination of the desire for synthesis and the recognition of diversity which makes many of [his] analyses both penetrating and (necessarily) inconclusive. One becomes acutely conscious reading his work of the fact that philosophy is both an endless discussion and a source of clarification and understanding.

(Taylor 1968: 402)

Described as “among the greatest living philosophers in the world today” (Bohman, Keding, and Rosa 2018: 725), Charles Taylor is one of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ most influential and prolific thinkers in the English-speaking world. The fact that he sometimes writes in French or German, combined with the translation of some of his works into Swedish, Japanese, Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, Chinese, Dutch, Norwegian, Czech, Serbian, and Turkish, means that his reception and influence reach far beyond an English-language audience. Perhaps the most striking feature of Taylor’s oeuvre is its breadth; his work ranges from reflections on artificial intelligence to analyses of contemporary multicultural societies. Also notable is the scope of his approach to philosophical questions, for he typically brings his knowledge of Greek, Christian, Renaissance, and modern thought as well as his appreciation of the arts to bear. As we see across the course of this book, Taylor’s remarks above about Paul Ricoeur apply equally to Taylor himself.

The phenomenal breadth of Taylor’s work has only expanded since the publication of the first edition of this book over twenty years ago. Since then, Taylor has written two large works – *A Secular Age* in

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2007 and *The Language Animal* in 2016. *Modern Social Imaginaries* appeared in 2004. He co-authored *Retrieving Realism* with Hubert Dreyfus in 2015, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* with Jocelyn Maclure in 2011, and *Reconstructing Democracy* with Madeline Beaubien Taylor and Patrizia Nanz in 2020. *Degenerations of Democracy* (2022) is another co-authored work to which Taylor contributes one chapter and co-authors, with Craig Calhoun, two others. A compilation of Taylor's essays, *Dilemma and Connections*, was published in 2011. An array of shorter pieces has also appeared every year.<sup>1</sup> This second edition provides an introduction to and overview of Taylor's growing body of work with the goal of fair and accurate exposition of his thinking.

Just as Taylor's output has increased, so his work has continued to attract its share of criticism, both for the way he has interpreted other thinkers and for his own substantive claims. Unfortunately, the limited size of this book precludes me from engaging such critiques (including my own). Some of the responses to the first edition correctly noted that I did not provide sustained critiques of Taylor – either from others or my own (Laitinen 2001: 52; Redhead 2002b: 170–171; K. Smith 2002: 122–123; Graham 2002: 311–312).<sup>2</sup> This book's primary goal is to outline Taylor's thought in a coherent and accessible way without reducing its richness and depth too greatly. And of course, getting Taylor 'right' is necessarily a hermeneutical affair, meaning that the most I can strive for is a 'best account' of his thought, not indubitable certainty about it.<sup>3</sup> I find Taylor's thinking to be magisterial in its range, and I have learned a great deal from him, both on particular topics and from his highly nuanced approach to theoretical problems. I admire the way he welcomes complexity into his theorizing and the fact that many of the complications he recognizes stem from social and political practice. He resists approaches to social explanation that proceed as if "the socio-historical world comes simply packaged" as well as those that are oblivious to social and political realities, dwelling instead in "a dissociated world of self-enclosed theory" (Taylor 1995b: 103–104). His responsiveness to practical situations, issues, and developments is especially apparent in his political theory and in his thinking about secularity. Those who reject the value of ideal theory could find in Taylor a model for how to do engaged theorizing. Yet while incorporating complexity and diversity, Taylor's thought does

not dissolve into relativism. He stays open to the possibility of reconciling differences democratically. His tendency to look for the appealing aspects of positions he criticizes is also admirable. I don't agree with Taylor on every point, as some of my contributions to the secondary literature indicate.<sup>4</sup> Getting Taylor's positions right, as I aim to in this book, is not synonymous with claiming that Taylor's positions are all right. But due to the constraints of space, as well as this book's *raison d'être*, its focus throughout is not critique. This should not, however, be mistaken for uncritical advocacy.

My hope with this edition as with the last one is, moreover, that faithful exposition will serve those who disagree with Taylor by laying out his positions in a clear, succinct, yet accurate manner and allowing them to aim their criticisms more accurately by basing them on a better understanding of his views. For reasons suggested below, and as we see throughout this book, Taylor's thought is not amenable to ready classification, so getting an accurate understanding of his thought is key to mounting a successful critique. I hope that this book will likewise serve those who agree with Taylor and those who have read or read about some of his work and seek to learn more about other parts of his wide corpus. I hope that readers of this edition will find what Michael Milde found in the last one: "a reliable, sympathetic, and accessible introduction . . . an eminently readable book which confronts the intricacies and challenges of Taylor's work with confidence and clarity" (Milde 2001/2: 359). I hope that this edition will warrant Karl E. Smith's description of its predecessor as "an insightful, succinct and accessible overview of the general themes, trends and issues" in Taylor's work (2002: 145–146, cf. Simpson 2002).

## Naturalism

As Michiel Meijer observes, "there is a kind of union throughout his concerns despite the wide spectrum of themes, as Taylor himself notes in the introduction of the *Philosophical Papers*" (Meijer 2014: 440). Introducing the volume on *Human Agency and Language*, he outlines what he calls "naturalism" and signals some of the ways in which it influences, and in his estimation infects, multiple departments of modern western thought. Taylor's overview of his



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work in that introduction, provided four decades ago, continues to offer its clearest synopsis.<sup>5</sup> As Taylor understands it, naturalism is the belief that the ways of knowing from the natural sciences can and should be emulated in the human sciences. Its logic runs that

- 1 Everything in nature can be explained in terms of post-Galilean science;
- 2 Humans are part of nature;
- 3 Humans can be explained in ways borrowed from or modelled on the natural sciences.

(Taylor 1985a: 2)

To understand the seduction of naturalist thinking, Taylor returns to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The foci of his interest in this watershed period are the philosophers of the new science: René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. Taylor uses Max Weber's image of "the disenchantment of the world" to capture the wider background against which the philosophical innovations of the seventeenth century occurred and to which they, in turn, contributed. Although influenced by older religious debates about voluntarism and nominalism, the erosion of belief in an inherently meaningful cosmos that bore prescriptions for human life began with the scientific revolution's mechanistic view of nature. The world

was no longer seen as the reflection of a cosmic order to which man was essentially related, but as a domain of neutral, contingent fact, to be mapped by the tracing of correlations, and ultimately manipulated in the fulfilment of human purposes.

(Taylor 1975: 539, cf. 7, 1985b: 256–260,  
1989: 18, 160, 395)

With this development, the cosmos no longer harboured final purposes or intrinsic moral value, and consequently there was no need for humans to seek any preordained moral or social meaning in it.

This changed worldview helps to explain one of the most influential developments in modern scientific thinking: the quest for

disengaged, objective knowledge of nature involving an attempt to understand the world devoid of its human meanings and significance (Taylor 2016: 154).

The great achievement of the seventeenth century scientific revolution was to develop a language for nature that was purged of human meanings. This was a revolution, because the earlier scientific languages, largely influenced by Plato and Aristotle, were saturated with purpose-and value-terms.

(Taylor 2002: 130)

The ambition was to distil the essential or primary properties of things by distinguishing these from what humans bring to the process of knowing (Taylor 1985b: 136, 143, 1995a: 65). Taylor describes this as trying to identify, and then neutralize, the anthropocentric aspects of human knowledge. Anthropocentric features such as colour became secondary properties, acquired in human beholding of or contact with things, inessential to the things themselves (Taylor 1985a: 2, 106, 1989: 130, 1995a: 40, 148). In “the languages of natural science”, it has proven “possible to develop languages for the objects of science that bracketed out human meanings, and still think effectively, indeed, more effectively, about the target domain” (Taylor 2002: 131).

The scientific revolution was notable for the belief that one of the benefits of understanding the natural world correctly would be the ability to reorder and reorganize it, and this way of interpreting the world has, by Taylor’s own admission, proven hugely beneficial in advancing knowledge in the natural sciences. This instrumental approach is especially evident in the thought of Bacon, who claimed that knowledge is power and hoped that the progress of scientific learning would yield myriad improvements in ordinary life (Taylor 1975: 8, 1989: 232). Because the natural sciences have been so successful in interpreting and changing the world, great prestige attaches to their sort of knowledge. Promising the power to reorder things, this kind of knowledge was also aspired to by those inquiring into human affairs (Taylor 1985b: 130), which helps to explain why the modes of knowledge in the natural sciences have seeped beyond their original domain.

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However, Taylor also believes that the appeal of this epistemology has come from more than its promise of power and instrumental control. A certain ethical conception of what it is to be human was woven into this way of knowing the world, and this too has proven alluring. There is, he proposes, an ideal of disengaged freedom bound up with this disengaged approach to knowledge. The belief that humans inhabit a disenchanted world frees them to develop their own goals and purposes rather than bending to preordained ones. A belief in self-responsibility and a certain conception of human dignity also inhere in this approach. Thus the immense attraction of naturalism has ethical sources too, and the points of its attraction – power, control, and a form of freedom – prove to be mutually reinforcing (Taylor 1985a: 4–7). Certain social institutions and practices entrench this view of the self and thus perpetuate and normalize it (Taylor 1975: 9, 1985a: 5, 12, 1985b: 5–7, 1995a: 4, 7–8, 75; Dreyfus and Taylor 2015: 24–25).

Rebutting naturalism and returning scientific thinking to its proper place has been one of Taylor's career-long preoccupations, beginning with *The Explanation of Behaviour* in 1964. As he says in reflecting on that early work, which was his doctoral dissertation, “the issues around human science, and the conditions of an adequate non-reductive explanation of human action have continued to preoccupy me throughout my life” (2021: xxi). The behaviouralism he took aim at in that book was but one expression of the naturalist view; socio-biology or evolutionary psychology and artificial intelligence are others (Taylor 1985a: 5). But whatever its manifestation, Taylor rejects the logic of naturalism.

In addition to calling out naturalism's baleful influence on the study of humans and insisting on the need for ways of understanding that are more fit for purpose than those deployed for the natural world, Taylor goes beyond critique to articulate his own positive alternatives.<sup>6</sup> These positive alternatives centre around a hermeneutical approach to the study of humans (1985a: 4), with Taylor describing *A Secular Age*, for example, as “an exercise in hermeneutics” (2021: xxiv). The chapters of this book lay out both Taylor's critiques of naturalism and his preferred approaches across a range of subject areas. Taylor's alternatives to naturalism include his contact theory of knowledge (Chapter 1); his conception of practical

reason (Chapter 1.6); his constitutive–expressive theory of language (Chapter 2); his concepts of strong evaluation (Section 3.3), constitutive goods (Section 3.6) and presumptive moral realism (Section 3.5); his theory of humans as self-interpreting animals (Section 2.6); the primacy of social belonging (Chapter 5); his defence of positive freedom (Section 5.3); and his detailed reconstruction of the social imaginaries underpinning secularity (Chapter 6).

## Chapter Outlines

The first chapter, on Taylor’s epistemology, pivots around his 2015 co-authored work with Hubert Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism*. It begins by outlining their contact theory of knowledge as an alternative to what they call the mediationalist approach. The contact theory places engaged, embodied knowledge at the centre of epistemology and recognizes the role of the background in this engagement. As a way of resisting the naturalist seepage of the scientific approach to knowledge across multiple domains, Taylor delineates the natural from the human sciences and insists that because the latter have an inescapably hermeneutical dimension, criteria for better and worse explanations imported from the natural sciences do not apply. When it comes to interpreting human societies, “there is no such thing as getting things definitively right, in the sense that no improvement could possibly be made” (Taylor 2021: xxii). But even if there is no way of getting things definitively right, Taylor’s conceptions of practical reason, best account thinking, and appeal to Gadamer’s concept of the fusion of horizons outlined in this chapter indicate what he thinks good arguments in the human sciences can look like.

Chapter 2 revolves around *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, published in 2016. It outlines what Taylor calls the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) approach to language and contrasts it with his preferred Hamann-Herder-Humboldt (HHH) approach. Although he believes that an understanding of language inspired by the latter is superior to its predecessor, he fears that many contemporary views of language perpetuate remnants of the HLC approach, lending his presentation of the HHH alternative continuing relevance. Taylor locates language as one among several

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symbolic forms and identifies the layers of holism in his preferred approach. This chapter discusses the centrality of conversation as the model for his understanding of language and moves onto three ways in which language informs his philosophical anthropology, by outlining his view of the dialogical self; of humans as self-interpreting animals; and of the narrative structure of self-interpretations.

Taylor's approach to morality is explored in Chapter 3, which starts by outlining the parameters of the moral for him and then discusses his belief that all humans inhabit a moral framework of some sort. Within those frameworks exist a series of strong evaluations, according to which some of the goods humans acknowledge are held or felt to be intrinsically higher than others. This concept of strong evaluation is laid out as a three-step process, and the thorny question of moral realism is explored. This chapter outlines the roles that life goods and constitutive goods occupy in Taylor's moral theory to conclude with some reflections on his approach to moral pluralism.

Taylor takes a two-dimensional approach to selfhood, giving his analysis ontological and historicist aspects. Chapter 4 focuses on the latter, charting the changing understandings that *Sources of the Self* identifies as pivotal in the formation of the modern western identity. Reconstructing that work, I present, in rough chronological order, five aspects of the modern western self. This self affirms ordinary life; believes in practical benevolence; aspires to freedom as radical disengagement; possesses a sense of its own inwardness; and prizes authenticity. This chapter underscores the pluralism of Taylor's account of the modern western self, showing how some of its strands dovetail while others diverge. It concludes by reviewing *Sources'* methods and proposes a fourfold motivation for that book.

Devoted to Taylor's political thinking, Chapter 5 begins with his long-standing critique of atomism and proposes the idea of individual rights as a case study for exploring his preference for what he calls "the social thesis" over atomism. The chapter then discusses his critique of a purely negative approach to freedom and links his support of a version of positive freedom to his belief in the value of democratic participation, which he traces to the civic humanist or republican tradition in western politics. This chapter points to the role of shared goods in politics and provides an overview of his