

# Ordinary life

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My best Charles Taylor moment came on Christmas Eve 1989. I was in Waterstone's bookshop in Liverpool looking for some last minute Christmas presents. A cookbook perhaps, or the Kenny Dalglish biography. I couldn't decide so I went to my home turf, the philosophy shelves. I was into the fifth year of my PhD and wondering if I'd ever finish. I'd spent a long time on Habermas's concept of modernity – there was a lot to read – and the other main protagonist I'd chosen was Charles Taylor. I'd reckoned there was enough in pieces like "Legitimation Crisis?" and the first chapter of the Hegel book to set up Taylor as a rival theorist of modernity to Habermas, but I had my doubts.<sup>1</sup>

Then I saw the book I'd been longing for, still in film wrapping, waiting for me on the shelf: *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.<sup>2</sup> I had bet on the right horse! There was only one copy so I quickly bought it. The hardback wasn't cheap but it was the perfect Christmas present, even if it was from myself.

When I got home and browsed through the contents, on that posh cream paper, my excitement intensified. There was familiar looking stuff: Identity and the good, Descartes's disengaged reason, fractured horizons, the expressivist turn. But "moral sources" – what on earth were they? "Epiphanies of modernism" – where did they come from? What caught my eye most though was the central section of the book: "The affirmation of ordinary life."<sup>3</sup> That looked new, and onto something big.<sup>4</sup>

The story of the theology of ordinary life recounted in the "God Loveth Adverbs" and "Rationalized Christianity" chapters certainly made for excellent festive reading. It was also gratifying to see the spiritual roots of utilitarianism dug up. Strangely enough, the God-fearing proto-utilitarianism of the Puritans and the like didn't seem as anti-worldly as the Bentham I had been forced to read, or, for that matter, as "stifling," to use Taylor's perfectly chosen word.

But the main deal for me was the alternative to the Habermasian conception of modernity taking shape. From my reading of Habermas and the other Critical Theorists I had simply assumed that instrumental reason was something merely mechanical and calculative; definitely on the other side of the "realm of meaning." There was an

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intramural debate within Critical Theory about whether instrumental reason had an intrinsically corrosive effect on the realm of meaning, and so bound to give rise to disenchantment, reification and so forth, or whether it had those effects only beyond a certain threshold (once it started to “colonize” the lifeworld). But Taylor was now challenging the shared assumption underlying this dispute. For at the origins of the modern identity, Taylor was saying, was a strong evaluation of the instrumental stance. We have forgotten that, for the first moderns, adopting the stance of instrumental rationality was “the spiritually essential step.”

Instrumental reason could thus peacefully occupy the lifeworld and indeed be drawn upon to promote the goods of “ordinary life,” Taylor’s term of art for “the life of production and reproduction,” effectively, work and family life. Ordinary life was not now to be regarded as “mere life,” the domain of spiritual weaklings, but as a zone of moral achievement in its own right, indeed a higher zone than the one endorsed in “traditional ethics.” We have forgotten what we owe to the early moderns in first perceiving this. They opened up a previously unseen and indeed hardly conceivable moral possibility: the *strong evaluation* of ordinary life. And the main reason they were able to do so, according to Taylor, was a theological shift within which ordinary life became “hallowed.” The Puritan notion of a calling was particularly important here. Ordinary life became worthy of affirmation, of strong evaluation, on account of its sanctified status.

Taylor’s account of the transfiguration of ordinary life and its role in the making of the moral identity provided me with just what I needed to undertake a comparative analysis with Habermas’s theory of modernity. It showed up something Habermas’s approach missed out. My thesis was back on track and, eventually, thanks to this moment in the bookshop, it reached its destination.

But there was something missing in Taylor’s approach too. In the famous last pages of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor describes the aim of his book as “one of retrieval,” as “an attempt to uncover buried goods through articulation,” so that they can empower once more.<sup>5</sup> Ordinary life, the life of production and reproduction, is rightly and crucially counted as one such set of goods. But what, today, would it mean for ordinary life to be *affirmed*? Let’s take the life of production. What, today, would it take for the life people lead when they go to work to be strongly valued, not just subjectively, but at the social and institutional levels that make up a culture?

I think Taylor was mistaken in presenting utilitarianism as an outlook that affirms ordinary life but is incapable of saying so on account of its ethics of inarticulacy. Utilitarianism never valued the life of production, either articulately or non-articulately. I even doubt that the Puritan precursors of the utilitarians affirmed ordinary life, either the productive or the reproductive part, in the sense of valuing it non-instrumentally. In any case, neither utilitarianism nor (God forbid) a sacralized version of it is well-suited to a retrieval of the goods that become manifest through participation in the life of production and reproduction, or, put more ordinarily and with more resonance, in working life and family life.

But a retrieval of those goods is still needed, and it remains a task for philosophers to find a language that will make them again empower.

**Notes**

1. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Charles Taylor, “Legitimation Crisis?,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 248–88.
2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
3. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 209 ff.
4. It was not completely new, however. Taylor mentions it, for example, in “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, 155 f.
5. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520 f.