Individuality and Recognition: Charles Taylor on Modern Freedom and the Public*

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Abstract

In this article, an exposition of Taylor’s position, sketched above will be given. Several characteristics of the public sphere Taylor gives will be categorized. The peculiar relationship between private identity formation (authenticity) and the public sphere will be at the forefront. Privaticizing morality versus the search for common grounds. At the end of the essay some concluding remarks are given about Taylor’s way of dealing with concretizing the ideal-typicalness of the extrapolitical public sphere. The democratic quality of the public sphere has to be seriously looked at. However, by overstressing the importance of the dialogical nature of mankind, Taylor underestimates the limiting implications the privatizing morality of the Enlightenment has for the discursive qualities of the public sphere. In particular, Rousseau, deserves more credit. Rousseau, the philosopher of private morality pur sang according to Taylor, describes the public sphere in a fictional way. Taylor steps too easily over the fictional qualities of the public sphere in terms of the general will. The concept of the general will, as an analytical instrument, has the qualities of discerning principally between the ideas of private morality and what public democratic legitimation is about. Rousseau is more liberal than Taylor likes to think.

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1 Introduction

In “The Politics of Recognition” (1994) Charles Taylor conjectures that the essential characteristic of mankind is his dialogical nature.¹ Together with his capacity to evaluate his desires (second order desires),² the capacity to communicate with “significant others” is what makes us truly human. We need dialogue in our identity formation. Only then we can say to act responsibly. Historically, Taylor sees the Enlightenment as the era in which men’s dialogical human nature became problematic and more important at the same time. The idea of authenticity entered the stage as the pivotal denominator of identity formation, namely, that every person is an individual source of morality. This made the need for dialogue crucial not only to bestow on communication of meanings, but also as the means to formulate the common categories that make communication possible at all. Identity as authenticity needs the conditions of communication to be recognized as authenticity as such.

Taylor localizes the public sphere as the ground where this constitutive activity takes place. Identity formation in the public sphere is public, that is, the meanings “are constituted by nothing outside the common action we carry out in it [...].³ In this essay, an exposition of Taylor’s position, sketched above will be given. Several characteristics of the public sphere Taylor gives will be categorized. The peculiar relationship between private identity formation (authenticity) and the public sphere will be at the forefront. Privaticizing morality versus the search for common grounds. At the end of the essay some concluding remarks are given about Taylor’s way of dealing with concretizing the ideal-typicalness of the extrapolitical public sphere. The democratic quality of the public sphere has to be seriously looked at. However,

¹ See pp. 32ff. Taylor claims that this “crucial feature of of the human condition [...] has been rendered almost invisible by the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy.” This statement seems rather hard to maintain.
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the limiting implications the privaticizing morality of the Enlightenment has for the discursive
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2 The Affirmation of Ordinary Life: The Discovery of Private Morality

Charles Taylor describes in the third part of Sources of the Self, “The Affirmation of
Ordinary Life,” how in the 17th century the classical appraisal of the virtues of philosophical
contemplation and political activity gave way to a modern laudatio of daily life. To illustrate,
Taylor cites John Milton’s (1608-1674) didactic phrases

To know

That which before us lies in daily life

Is the prime wisdom

The appraisal of ordinary life found its way in many areas of activity. For instance, in Dutch
paintings, subjects like domestic interiors, activities and mores became object of artistic
inspiration. Allegoric pieces of art that show us the growing self-consciousness of the higher

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3 Public Sphere.
5 The Glory of the Golden Age. Dutch Art of the 17th Century Painting, Sculpture and Decorative Art
(1997): “Since time immemorial artists have taken motifs from their own surroundings, but until the 17th century
everyday actions or events were almost never the main subject of a painting. In the 15th and 16th centuries
depicting a specific subject: representations of the four seasons featured scenes of peasant life, and depictions of
the five senses included scenes of eating, and music-making. Such themes as the seven deadly sins or the seven
virtues, as well as biblical stories and proverbs, provided an opportunity to depict scenes of everyday life.”
bourgeoisie displaying her products of hard work, realised by a dictum of calvinistic discipline – truly exponents of Hannah Arendt’s homo faber.\textsuperscript{6}

Taylor’s thesis of the growing importance of the private world in the modern era – which has been posted by many before him (e.g. Weber, Arendt, Foucault) – has telling religious roots. The Reformation has been a crucial occurrence in this privatizing process. It’s asymptotic epistemology proclaiming the fundamental limits of human knowledge concerning God’s Will – “the absolute transcendentality of God compared to the flesh: \textit{finitum non est capax infiniti}”\textsuperscript{7} – triggered a focus on worldly existence and good actions, accordingly.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, this protestant truth stood at the cradle of the modern process of individualization. The beginning stage of this process must have been truly a \textit{decretum horribile}. As Max Weber vividly notes: “In its extreme inhumanity this doctrine must above all have had the consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency. That was a feeling of unprecedented loneliness of the single individual. In what was for the man of the age of the Reformation the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation, he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him for eternity.”\textsuperscript{9} However, according to Taylor, despite his subjective feelings of loneliness, the 16th and 17th century individual still found comfort in the natural-theological concept of Deism, in which God’s given human nature was seen as the ultimate source of knowledge of the good and the right.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{6} Hannah Arendt (1958) \textit{The Human Condition}.
\textsuperscript{8} “On the one hand, it is held to be an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace. [...] On the other hand, in order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.” \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 111-112. Cf. Taylor, Sources, p. 228: “[W]hile humans can do nothing to bring about reconciliation, the reconciled person feels the imperative need to repair the disorder of things, to put them right again in God’s plan.”
\textsuperscript{9} Weber, \textit{Protestant Ethic}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{10} Explaining Deism in its times Taylor refers to the Cambridge Platonists (Sources, p. 249), but especially to Francis Hutcheson and John Locke. According to Taylor for all their different interpretations of Deism, the latter two shared a naturalistic faith of the strong connection between nature and the divine. Hutcheson: “It was
Taylor sees Rousseau as the one who finally rejects this naturalism, calling for a strict separation of fact and value. For Rousseau a fundamental difference exists between God’s and men’s nature: true justice, that which is divine, is something beyond man’s reason to grasp. That which is called morality can only be the product of individual reflection (and that which is public morality can only be artificial). Taylor considers Rousseau to be at the brink of a radicalization of the process of individualization. Subjectivity itself became the source of morality. Taylor: “We might speak of an individualized identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself. This notion arises along with an ideal, that of being true to myself and my own particular way of being.” As a result, the prominence of Luther’s thesis of the exclusive personal relationship with God made way for Rousseau’s thesis of the exclusive personal relationship with oneself (of which God is part): le sentiment de l’existence. People were seen as individual sources of morality, as self-governing (autonomous) beings.

observed above, how admirably our Affections were contrived for the good in the whole […] they all aim at good, either private or publick: and by them each particular Agent is made, in great measure, subservient to the good of the whole. Mankind are thus insensibly linked together, and make one great System, by an invisible Union.” Cited in ibidem, p. 264. See E.A. Huppes-Cluysenaer (2000) Wetenschapsleer voor juristen. Tekstboek, p. 222, who quotes Rousseau’s portraying Grotius as a naturalistic fallacist.

12 See the opening sentences of Emile: “Every is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things, everything degenerates in the hands of man.”

13 “What is good and in conformity with order is such by the very nature of things and independently of human agreement. All justice comes from God, who alone is its source; and if only we knew how to receive it from that exalted fountain, we should need neither governments nor laws. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1968, 1762) The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right, p. 80.

14 “Rousseau frequently presents the issue of morality as that of our following a voice of nature within us.”


16 Jürgen Habermas refers to J.W. von Goethe who called the aristocrat’s essence composed of what he represented. Yet the bourgeois could not rely on any social representation beforehand. “Hence, Goethe advised not to ask him [the bourgeois, GD] ‘What art thou?’ but only: ‘What hast thou? What discernment, knowledge, talent, wealth?’ This is a statement which Nietzsche's later aristocratic pretensions adopted: a man proved himself not by what he could do, but by who he was.” Jürgen Habermas (1996, 1989, 1962) Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, 13.
Taylor sees this idea of *identity as authenticity* as a modern and revolutionary idea: each person having his own measure.\(^\text{17}\) “Before the late eighteenth century, no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life.”\(^\text{18}\)

### 3 Authenticity and Recognition: Modern Identity Formation

Yet, for Taylor, “in the nature of the case,” this modern idea of identity as authenticity falls short – as we can see in our contemporary culture of authenticity, he notes\(^\text{19}\) – due to overlooking a crucial aspect of the human condition, namely its dialogical quality. Without dialogue authenticity grows to be autistic. Ultimately, we cannot derive identification from within, for we are creatures equipped with modes of expressions that form the very basis of identification. Not only are we becoming “full human agents” through these modes of expression, they are introduced to us “through interaction with others who matter to us.”

These people are called by Taylor – following Mead – “significant others.”\(^\text{20}\) To have an identity, i.e., an understanding of who we are, we depend on the significant other. “[M]y discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue. […] My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.”\(^\text{21}\) Exchanging experiences gives us a sense of ourselves (self-conscious). Dialogue is both the natural condition for a human being, and the normative condition for being human,

\(^{17}\) Cf.: Alasdair McIntyre (1984) *After Virtue*, 38: “We are so accustomed to classifying judgements, arguments and deeds in terms of morality that we forget how relatively new the notion was in the culture of the Enlightenment.”


\(^{20}\) Ibidem, p. 32.

\(^{21}\) Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” p. 34.
i.e., to be a moral person.\textsuperscript{22} Oppositely, “[t]he monological ideal […] forgets how our understanding of the good things in life can be transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we love; how some goods become accessible to us only through common enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{23} Of course, people do exist who refuse to see this, but they are being dismissed by Taylor as “hermits” or “solitary artists.”\textsuperscript{24} Ultimately, identity formation depends a great deal on its public and communicative character, namely in the recognition we receive from others we are in dialogue with.

Now, according to Taylor only in the 18th century this dialogical character of identity became problematic, and therefore, more important. For the social categories on which the dialogical character of identity depended turned into objects of scrutiny themselves. The natural-theological categories of Deism could not provide anymore for the straightforward ontological fundaments of the social categories. Indeed, the social categories had to be formulated within the social culture itself (\textit{Kultur, civilisation}\textsuperscript{25}). In the words of Rousseau: “the social order is a sacred right which serves as a basis for all other rights. And [since] it is not a natural right, it must be one founded on covenants.”\textsuperscript{26} Man’s nature could not straightforwardly provide anymore for a common fundament on which exchange of ideas and identities could take place. The supreme platform on which to formulate such covenants only could be an artificial place in which the substance of dialogue came from dialogue itself. The public sphere provided for this, in Taylor’s words, the place where “a general understanding

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. John Rawls (1996, 1993) \textit{Political Liberalism}, p. 41: “We have no prior identity before being in society […].”
\textsuperscript{23} Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” p. 33.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibidem, p. 34.
of what things count as constitutive of the reality […]”\textsuperscript{27} is being formulated. The modern public sphere was the substitution for the transcendental categories for social action.\textsuperscript{28}

Summarizing, Taylor makes three claims. One ethical: our capacity to have dialogues, to communicate, is what makes us essentially human. Secondly, one historical: since the Enlightenment this capacity has become problematic due to the process of individualization of identities (authenticity). And lastly, one epistemological: in order to work out our individualized morality we need a public sphere that provides the communicative conditions for developing our dialogical nature on the basis of authenticity.

4 The Public Sphere: Ethical and Moral

Taylor gives the following characteristics of the public sphere, as it originated in the 18th century.\textsuperscript{29} Firstly, the public sphere provides a common focus for discussion. Secondly, the public sphere transcends topical spaces. It does not exist for one specific purpose; it is a metatopical space.

Yet, both these characteristics do not give the public sphere its unprecedentedness, for institutions like church and state can be called metatopical and have common spaces as well. What makes the public sphere truly new, according to Taylor, was its critical status. Ideally, it provides for enlightened, non-partisan public opinion based on rational discussion. “So what the public sphere does is to enable the society to reach a common mind, without the mediation of the political sphere, in a discourse of reason outside power, which nevertheless is formative for power.”\textsuperscript{30} The public sphere has such a critical capacity through its extrapoltical status. Contrary to the ancient public sphere, in the modern public sphere, the discussants are not the lawmakers. They are not represented by and do not represent political power structures. They

\textsuperscript{28} Ibidem, p. 271.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem, pp. 259 ff.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibidem, p. 266.
are identified a priori, while in classical societies, “the people didn’t have an identity, didn’t constitute an unity prior to and outside these laws.”

Modern people possess what Jürgen Habermas calls the status of l’homme: being of equal value through their membership of “association mankind,” and not by the fact of their membership of a real association. Taylor speaks of dignity, following Rousseau and Kant, that people have in this quality, being abstracted from their many differentiated roles. The other true novel characteristic of the public sphere is its secularity. It has no foundation “that transcends contemporary common action.” For Taylor this is crucial. “[T]he 18th century public sphere represents an instance of a new kind: a metatopical common space and common agency without an action transcendent constitution, an agency grounded purely in its own common actions.”

Now, what we see is that Taylor relates the communicative function of the public sphere to the l’homme status of man. Its epistemological meaning is based not on authenticity but on dignity. Taylor describes the public sphere as a realm in which the individual as l’homme shares this identity with his fellow beings. Both its secularity and its extrapoliticalness are characteristics of the public sphere that relate directly to this egalitarian function of the public sphere. However, we saw the other function of the public sphere, as well, i.e., its ethical function, to account for the process of identity formation: receiving recognition from others we are in dialogue with.

Therefore, we can conclude, that, for Taylor, the public sphere has a dual function, which is centered around the need for common action. First, common action is derived from the psychological process of identity formation, which is based on the recognition of authenticity.

31 Idem.
32 Habermas, Structural Transformation, 55.
33 Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” p. 44.
34 Ibidem, p. 51.
35 Taylor, “Public Sphere,” p. 267.
36 Ibidem, p. 269.
Second, common action is derived from the constitutive process of critique formation/rational discussion, which is based on recognition of dignity. We can call these functions respectively ethical and moral. Both functions seem to be directly related, that is, in their having political consequences. For the ethical function of the public sphere, namely its power to claim recognition for authenticity, and the moral function, namely its power to equalize status, both carry democratic implications. The logic of authenticity entails a need for democracy: every person has a claim to this recognition, and a right to explain why.\textsuperscript{37} Here we see the procession of the experience of modern identity as authenticity into a democratic experience, based on the principle of universal equality (dignity). In Taylor’s words: “The universal demand powers an acknowledgement of specificity.”\textsuperscript{38}

Indeed, Taylor, stresses the ideal-typicalness of the public sphere, finding its extrapoliiticalness in fact an illusion.\textsuperscript{39} Without underestimating the emancipatory and liberating effects of the ideal-typical extrapoliiticalness of the public sphere,\textsuperscript{40} the turn towards assessment of the democratic quality of the public sphere has to be made.\textsuperscript{41} And for Taylor, central to the democratic decisions in the public sphere, is how they affect the people’s self-understanding.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{37} “The same cultural and political changes that brought about the public sphere as a space for extrapoliitical common action, to which power was obligated to listen, needed only to be carried a little farther to the proposition that the people should rule, that sovereignty belongs to the people.” Taylor, “Public Sphere,” 273.
\textsuperscript{38} Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” p. 39.
\textsuperscript{39} Taylor, “Public Sphere,” p. 272: “The public sphere is inhabited by all sorts of agents, including those with large political axes to grind, and not in the least those who are linked to established government.”
\textsuperscript{40} Idem: “But although encroached on to some degree, the fact that these domains operate and are seen to operate by their own dynamic has been of crucial importance to the limitation of power and hence to the maintenance of freedom in the modern West. This seems to me beyond contest.
\textsuperscript{41} This reminds us of Habermas’s critique on the formalism of the classical-liberal conception of the public sphere: “A public sphere of civil society from which specific groups would be eo ipso excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all.” See Habermas, Structural Transformation, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{42} Taylor, “Public Sphere,” p. 276.
5 Conclusion

Now, what is the relationship between the two functions of the public sphere and Taylor’s democratic ideal of self-understanding? What is the relationship between authenticity, dignity, and public self-understanding? Moreover, what exactly is left of the modern private morality Taylor sketched? Is Rousseau’s *sentiment d’existence* not being suppressed between the imperatives of ethical recognition and democratic self-understanding? I think it is. I will conclude by explaining this thesis. It is illuminative to illustrate this by turning to Taylor’s normative treatment of Rousseau.

Taylor sees two dominant models for assessing the democratic quality of public decisions, that is, how those decisions reflect the sense people have of their sovereignty, their self-rule. The first model is unanimist – called by Taylor “Jacobin” – with Rousseau as its theoretical father, and sees democratic decisionmaking as the outcome of an unanimous general will. The second model is objectivist – called by Taylor the interest view – in which people are seen as having “interests that can be identified prior to decisions.” Both models are rejected by Taylor because “the Jacobin view can’t accommodate diversity, [and] the interest view can’t accommodate anything else; in particular can’t account for the degree to which a political society functions as a community.”

Now, without delving any deeper in the above division, let’s take a look at the theoretical division which lies underneath it. Then we can see how Taylor misses the point in his interpretation of Rousseau, and why it might be better to have put Rousseau in the liberal camp.

The division above arises from an initial division of models about the primary function of the public sphere, concerning its extrapolitical status, limiting of power differently. The first model is liberal and sees the main reason for power limitation in *freedom*. This one falls short,
according to Taylor, for which reason we need a second model, one that sees the goal of limiting power contained in the quest for self-rule, i.e., “to strive to make power and in general whatever shapes the conditions of our lives responsive to collective decisions.”\textsuperscript{45} For Taylor, the liberal model of the public sphere is guilty on artificially dividing the private sphere as the space of individual sovereignty in choosing the good life on the one hand, and the public sphere as the space where individual interests are objectively and neutrally screened for democratic decisions, on the other. The liberal model misses the link between private authenticity and public recognition. People belong to a community and do want to see that affirmed on a public democratic level accordingly. For Taylor this can only mean that in the public sphere the process of identity formation has to be included somehow. Besides individual qualities (authenticity), the value of recognition has democratic aspects as well (dignity). But since modern societies do not have homogeneous cultures, we cannot publicly interpretate recognition neutrally. Many meaningful cultures make up people’s horizons. We grow up in collectively defined cultural backgrounds, and therefore, democratic decision making on a public level has to take notice of that.

According to Taylor, Rousseau’s ideal of “complete reciprocity” in the public sphere won’t work as a self-rule conception of democratic quality of the public sphere. The equal dignity hoped for in Rousseau’s conception of the general will, will turn out to be unequal, for in effect it homogenizes identity formation. “We must all be dependent on the general will, lest there arise bilateral forms of dependence.”\textsuperscript{46} Taylor concludes that the margins for difference in Rousseau’s conception of commonality in the public sphere are extremely narrow, and impossible to maintain. The formation of a general will resulting in unanimity hardly happens. Taylor mentions Britain in 1940 and America during the Gulf War.

\textsuperscript{44} Idem.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibidem, p. 274.
\textsuperscript{46} Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” p. 51.
But Taylor doesn’t do justice to Rousseau. For Rousseau was very conscious of the practical impossibility of an empirical general will, for that would only be “a sum of particular wills.” Taylor’s referral to the Gulf War and WW II as examples of nearly public unanimity is illustrative of his misapprehension of Rousseau. The general will is a fiction, for it is a necessary result from the idea of identity as authenticity.

On a public level, that is, where democratic decisions are made, public culture should reign. This is what Rousseau means by: “[E]ach man alienates by the social pact only that part of his power, his goods and his liberty which is the concern of the community […].” This community is political, i.e. “[h]ere can be no invoking the principle of civil law which says that no man is bound by a contract with himself, for there is a great difference between having an obligation to oneself and having an obligation to something of which one is a member.”

Taylor’s idea of community, however, is part of the interactions of private moralities which, indeed is a heterogeneous cultural process. This shows a certain postmodernism of the interpretation Taylor has of modernity and Rousseau. Rousseau surely didn’t see structures in the public sphere as “nothing more than precipitates and facilitators of communicative action,” as Taylor sees them. This Habermassian interpretation of the public sphere is exactly the procedural republic Taylor – following Michael Sandel – thinks falls short of democratic quality.

Rousseau’s conception of the public sphere apparently weakens the freedom of the individual for private morality. However, it was Rousseau’s specific object to define a public sphere as narrow as possible so as to provide space for private freedom. Taylor is right to champion Rousseau as the great theorist of private morality. But by bringing in “recognition” as a part of the process of private identity-formation as authenticity in the public sphere,

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48 Taylor, “Public Sphere,” p. 268.
Taylor fails to understand Rousseau’s idea of the general will, and places him unrightfully opposite of liberals. The general will can only cover a small part of morality in society, the rest is up to the dynamics of private moralities. “Moral dimensions have no precise standard of measurement; even if we could agree about signs, how should we agree on their value?”

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50 Rousseau, Social Contract, p. 130.


