Peter McCormick
Modernities

LIBRI NIGRI

75

Edited by

Hans Rainer Sepp

The *libri nigri* series is edited at the Central-European Institute of Philosophy, Prague.
www.sif-praha.cz

Peter McCormick

Modernities

Histories, Beliefs, and Values

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie.
Detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über
http://dnb.ddb.de

This book is a result of the project
"Providence and morality"
(No. IGA_CMTF_2019_001)
supported by the Palacký University Olomouc.

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH
D-99734 Nordhausen 2020

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-95948-441-1

For Helen and Timothy Tackett

Contents

Preface

Modernities: Histories, Beliefs, and Values, and its companion volume in the same distinguished series, *Solicitations: Poverties, Discourses, and Limits*, appear in especially challenging times. Europe, many informed persons keep saying, is once again in crisis. But exactly what the crisis is few seem able to say. When the "crisis" cannot be stated clearly, the "crisis" is certainly critical.

On the one hand, so many geo-political, economic, political, financial, social, and cultural problems appear to be proliferating endlessly. Yet at the same time so many thoughtful persons continue to narrow their perspectives to almost single issue concerns.

Good examples of both overly broad and overly narrow approaches include ongoing discussions at many levels concerning accelerating climate change, worsening migration issues, and even increasingly widespread fears of coming tactical if not strategic nuclear warfare. Moreover, working seriously in sustained ways to find reasonable and efficient middle ground approaches between multifarious and mono-causal reflections on current European crises often simply falls between the two poles instead of actually bridging them fruitfully.

The main effort here is certainly not a matter of bridging. Rather the attempt is to inquire more particularly into some of the major philosophical and cultural grounds underlying so much general and specialized talk today of Europe's new crises. Accordingly, several basic headings stand out. Just three are selected here – alternative early modern histories of European post--modern cultures today, contrasting readings of just how knowledge and belief are to be understood fundamentally, and rationally competitive visions of basic human values.

One general supposition throughout is that recurring European crises today continue to arise in part not just out of contemporary problems only but out of deeply sedimented confusions about quite fundamental matters. In other words, were someone to try to state the nature of the present European "crisis" clearly, perhaps someone could not improperly say something like the following. Underlying the insistent crises of Europe today is a deepening confusion about the fundamental sense and significance of history, beliefs, and values grounding European cultures.

Indeed, this seems to be repeatedly the case. That is, this is the case whether the pragmatic problems at issue are, for example, the struggles over renewing the legal articulations of the EU in the wake of any eventual Brexit Treaty and the USA's new isolationism, or the harmonizing of EU immigration and asylum policies in the face of increasingly more successful populist political movements, or the urgent reconfigurations of the EU financial and military commitments to Nato's outdated mission statements in response to the thorough-going modernization of Russia's entire military forces and its annexation of Crimea and separation of the two easternmost provinces of Ukraine.

Accordingly, the basic perspective here might not unfairly be summarized as historical, epistemological, and axiological. The historical axis turns on the different echoes of Europe's multiple modernities in contemporary international legal theory as well as in education. The epistemological axis runs through early modernities to the particular cases of eighteenth-century aesthetics and nineteenth-century philosophy of language and of art. And the axiological axis cuts diagonally across basic issues in competing ideas of the good, kinds of identity both religious and cultural, and the metaphysical independence of the person.

Confusions about all three dimensions, I believe, whether each is taken by itself or in one combination or another with the other two, require fresh reflection. Such fresh reflection is required if Europe's "crises" are to be understood well enough to accommodate better and more durable solutions than at present.

As each of the essays will demonstrate, my debts are very many. In particular, however, I would single out the continuing support of Hans Rainer Sepp who has so encouragingly welcomed this book and its companion into his wide ranging book series, *Libri nigri*, and the very strong support of Dean Vit Husek in Olomouc who has repeatedly sought out and found the necessary funding for professional publication. I also would like to point out once again the persistently stimulating philosophical atmosphere of regular meetings with friends in Lviv, Ukraine, in Olomouc, Czech Republic, and in Cracow, Poland.

Above all, I am very much indebted in many ways to ongoing sustained conversations with my long standing friends and colleagues, Volodymyr Turchynovskyy from the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Martin

Cajthaml from the Palacky University in Olomouc, and to Czeslaw Porebski from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow Poland.

My greatest debt, however, is to my spouse and family.

Peter McCormick
Paris, 6 January 2019

Part One: HISTORIES

Essay I:

Modernities and Histories[1]

> "… one has to understand people's self-interpretations and their visions of the good, if one is to explain how they arise; but the second task can't be collapsed into the first, even as the first can't be elided in favour of the second."
>
> *– Charles Taylor*[2]

> "In the 1580s and '90s, sceptical acceptance of ambiguity and a readiness to live with uncertainty were still viable intellectual policies: by 1640, this was no longer the case. Intellectual options opened up by Erasmus and Rabelais, Montaigne and Bacon, were set aside …"
>
> *– Stephen Toulmin*[3]

If the most important consequences of modernity in our own times today are to be properly grasped, some distinguished intellectual historians and philosophers have insisted, several different readings of early modern history need to be understood critically. An excellent starting point for reviewing such readings is the many faceted work of the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, especially his *Sources of the Self* .[4]

Although later on I will be returning to other aspects of Taylor's work in Part Two and Part Three of these essays, here at the outset of Part One assembling some reminders about his complex goals in his story of the sources of the self proves fruitful for understanding modernity and its histories.

Taylor's first goal is to provide "a history of the modern identity."[5] Such a history he thinks must comprise formulations of "the ensemble of (largely unarticulated) understandings of what it is to be a human agent" in view of showing "how the ideals and interdicts of this identity … shape our philosophical thoughts» (ix).

His second goal is to use this story of the modern identity as "the starting point for a renewed understanding of modernity." Modernity Taylor takes here as "the momentous transformations of our culture and society over the last three or four centuries and getting these somehow in focus" (ix). In sum, Taylor aims to provide both a thematic story of human agency and an historical account of how this story has developed.

Critically appreciating that story, however, involves understanding how that story has developed.[6] My plan is to look at this development by gradually narrowing the focus from the overall sketch of Taylor's story to what I will argue is the story's turning point. That turning point Taylor takes as the origins of modernity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

With the central elements of that turning point once in view, I will then turn to a recent alternative account of the origins of modernity, Steven Toulmin's influential discussions in his book, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.[6] In comparing and contrasting Taylor's story with Toulmin's we will then be in a position to investigate just how much Taylor's story of the modern identity actually supports his twofold goal.

Explanatory and Interpretive Accounts

Taylor is quick to deny that his story makes any explicit claims to pass as an historical explanation. Stressing the very many important topics he excludes, Taylor claims only to be "dwelling on certain developments in philosophical and religious outlook, with an odd glance at aspects of popular mentality" (199). Significantly, as it will turn out later, one of the extensive developments Taylor excludes from detailed consideration is Renaissance humanist views which he chooses to mention only in passing.

Among them are views on human dignity in Pico's *Oration*, or those on human agency in Nicholas of Cusa where agency is a completion of the creative work of God, or the hermetic and magical background in Dee and Paracelsus for Bacon's revolutionary work, or the explorations of Alberti and Vasari in the visual arts and their expansion on the understanding of human creative powers themselves, or even Florentine neo-Platonism in Michelangelo's and Leonardo's contrasting understandings of just what "nature" art is to imitate and from just what perspectives (cf. 199–202). Part of what he is trying to do, Taylor concedes, works against any attempt at historical comprehensiveness. Still, this seems a bit much to pass over lightly.

Taylor thinks that his story is not to be taken as an historical explanation because he is not asking "what brought the modern identity about," a ques-

tion that focuses on diachronic causation. Rather, he calls his question "an interpretive one" (203). This question goes: "in what consists the appeal, the spiritual power, the '*idées-forces*' of the modern identity however it was brought to be in history" (203)?

The historical and interpretive questions, to be sure, are closely related; but they are also distinct questions. For each requires a related but different kind of answer, the first in terms of causal explanation and the second in those of interpretive understanding. And Taylor's interpretive question is centred on where the force of certain issues is to be found.

One consequence of raising interpretive rather than explanatory questions about the modern identity, Taylor thinks, is his being able to offer an incomplete account only. He claims however that the incompletion is unavoidable. For no interpretive investigation by its nature can do full justice to the endless complexity of understanding both the material contents and the human motivation that make up the precipitating conditions of such central Western phenomena as the emergence of the modern identity. As Taylor writes, "one has to understand people's selfinterpretations and their visions of the good, if one is to explain how they arise; but the second task can't be collapsed into the first, even as the first can't be elided in favour of the second" (204).

With these precisions in place, Taylor then moves quickly to formulate in interpretive rather than in explanatory terms his basic thesis about the emergence of the modern identity. "The modern identity arose," he writes, "because changes in the self-understandings connected with a wide-range of practices ... converged and reinforced each other to produce it ..." (206). Consequently, Taylor's concern in developing his story is not to address the direction of causal arrows between "*idéesforces*" and practices at any one moment in history. Rather, he proposes to sketch the various facets in the development of the modern identity in terms of the "*idées force*" themselves.

If these are the major lines in Taylor's own view of just what kind of story he is telling, an interpretive rather than an explanatory one, what then are the major phases in this story? These phases comprise three overlapping historical periods.

The first phase stretches, Taylor says, from "Augustine to Descartes and Montaigne, and on to our own day" (x). Here he wants to stress the first of the three elements he conjectures as central ingredients in the modern identity, "modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths" (x). The second phase overlaps the first. It stretches from "the Reformation through the Enlightenment to its contemporary forms." The stress here falls

on "the affirmation of ordinary life." And the final phase stretches from "the late 18th century through the transformations of the 19th century, and on to its manifestations in 20th century literature." This final phase accents the third ingredient of the modern identity, "the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source" (x).

Taylor treats the first phase under the heading, "Inwardness," the second under that of "The Affirmation of Ordinary Life," and the last as under the headings, "The Voice of Nature" and "Subtler Languages." The full story – and it is both very long and still both a "prelude" to later works – Taylor puts under the guiding adage "understanding modernity is an exercise in retrieval" (xi).[7]

Consider the first phase only of this story and indeed just that part of it that deals with the emergence of the modern identity in early modern times from Descartes to Locke. We need first a brief sketch of the trajectory Taylor follows in his account of the first phase, then a brief inventory of the salient features in the move from Descartes to Locke, and finally a sharper focus on just what the major claims about this movement really are.

Descartes versus Plato, Augustine, and Montaigne

In discussing the first phase in the emergence of modern identity, the new focus on inwardness, Taylor ranges in a series of eight chapters from Plato to Augustine, to Descartes and Locke. He then returns to Montaigne and finally summarizes this part of his story around several key points. The culmination of this long discussion is his claim that the modern identity emerges by the end of the 18th century as a conjunction of three key elements of inwardness – forms of self exploration, forms of self control, and "the individualism of personal commitment" (185).

Together, these three elements make up a first sketch of the modern identity as a "three sided individualism." These three sides include a characteristic localisation for self exploration in the inward individual, an instrumental form of moral atomism in the understanding of self control through the protections of subjective rights, and a productive economic sense of individualism as a "new centrality of constructed orders and artefacts in mental and moral life" (197).

Although this three-sided individualism emerges at the end of a sweeping view of western intellectual history from Plato to Locke, one of the most important strands in this story concerns the Cartesian transformation of the Augustinian tradition of radical reflexivity and inwardness. This strand more-

over is carefully intertwined with a related but different one, namely a second version of internalization or radical reflexivity that we find in Montaigne. Thus for Taylor the critical opposition is between Cartesian disengagement of an inner subject and Montaigne's exploration of an inner self.

Each of these two strands of early modern thought suggests a fresh understanding of human agency in terms of differing accents on inwardness. The first strand suggests the Cartesian relocation of moral sources and understanding of the good in a disengaged subjectivity duly objectified for analysis. And the second strand suggests a counterbalancing humanist insistence on exploring a self without insisting on its objectification. Before considering a contrasting view, we should look at this opposition more closely.

By contrast with both Pagan and Christian antiquity, with Plato and Augustine, Taylor sees Descartes as elaborating what he calls a "new conception of inwardness, an inwardness of self-sufficiency, of autonomous powers of ordering by reason. . . ." (158). In short, Descartes both disengages the subject and proceduralizes reason. The result is that traditional moral sources are no longer located outside the subject, for example in the Ideas or in the will of God; they are now located within the subject.

With respect to Plato, Descartes substitutes a completely different understanding of self-exploration based on Galileo's new "resolutive- compositive" method rather than on any theological inquiries informed by metaphysical theories of "logos." The result of this change in scientific theorizing is a corresponding change in how human beings are to be understood. Once the key to scientific exploration is seen to lie outside any appeals to a theory of ideas, the moral ground these ideas supported also has to be located elsewhere.

Thus just as correct scientific knowledge of things now must involve the inner representation of such things, so moral knowledge requires a similar inner representation. Taylor's point sems to be that in both cases this inward representation is neither an imitation nor a participation but a construction. Consequently, the order of things "migrates" from outside to inside. The order of things becomes an order of representation that finally generates not just knowledge but certainty as well.

Thinking becomes a gathering, a collecting, a "*cogitare*" (cf. 14345) whose standards derive not from the world but from the thinking subject. These standards require that the body as well as the material world be understood as entirely distinct from the subject. The result is that the subject itself is no longer properly understood as disengaged from the world and its objectifications.

In short, a different epistemology leads to a different metaphysics, and the different metaphysics results in a different philosophical anthropology or

philosophy of mind. In particular, "self mastery [now] consists in our lives being shaped by the orders that our reasoning capacity constructs according to the appropriate standards" (147).

When we turn from Plato to Augustine, we find that Descartes substitutes a new understanding of insight, one no longer dependent on a transformation of the will that finally allows insight into the good, but one grounded in the realm of independent mental substance.

Unlike the Stoic doctrines that Augustine revised in large measure, Descartes's doctrines exclude the possibility of taking the cosmos as embodying a meaningful order in such a way that ethics could continue to be founded on a subjectivized physics. The world rather is a mute and meaningless mechanism to be grasped "functionally as a domain of possible ends . . . . a domain of potential instrumental control" (149). Rational self mastery requires insight, but insight is directed to the realm of mind and no longer to the realm of matter.

This fresh understanding of insight in terms of the mental only leads also to a new view of the passions. Unlike the Stoics and their later baptizers who saw the passions as instances of opinion, Descartes views the passions functionally. The passions are devices that "help preserve the body-soul substantial union" (150), that help preserve the organism from danger by triggering certain reflexes. Accordingly, rational self mastery means keeping the passions subordinated to the instrumental control of reason. Acting efficaciously thus is engaging oneself through the instrumentality of the passions, but engaging oneself in a detached way from the perspective of inwardness as rational self--control. "The new definition of the mastery of reason brings about an internalization of moral sources," Taylor writes.

> "When the hegemony of reason comes to be understood as rational control, the power to objectify body, world, and passions, that is, to assume a thoroughly instrumental stand towards them, then the sources of moral strength can no longer be seen outside us in the traditional mode… [And] if rational control is a matter of mind dominating a disenchanted world of matter, then the sense of a good life, and the inspiration to attain it, must come from the agent's sense of his own dignity as a rational being" (1512).

Descartes thus displaces temperance as the heart of the moral vision with that great-souled generosity that arises from human dignity (cf. 154–5). And rationality itself he now takes to consist not in a vision of an external reality but in certain properties of internal thinking. "Rationality," Taylor writes, "is no longer defined substantively, in terms of the order of being, but rather proce-