Charles Taylor and Phenomenology
Week 1 – 17th Oct 2025

Phenomenology in Taylor's account of his own intellectual trajectory

'When I belatedly began to study philosophy, I was disappointed by the limits of the then dominant empiricist vision of analytical philosophy at Oxford, by its closure towards what I naively considered to be the essential questions of philosophy' (Taylor 1998, 104).

'For so many English people, what they hold to be the right philosophical style is sacred, they identify it with integrity, with good conduct' (Taylor 1998, 104).

The distinctiveness of Taylor's voice in discourses on secularism and liberal democracy

Three suppositions

1. Taylor's enduring formulations – the 'modern social imaginary,' the 'immanent frame,' and 'the buffered self' – are phenomenological.

2. Taylor invites readers to adduce their own lived experience in sociological enquiry by drawing upon 'engaged understanding' (Taylor 1998, 105), and 'the kind of embedded knowing which Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have thematised' (Taylor 2005, 29).

    'The enculturated actor does not need an interpretation; she knows right off' (Taylor 2003, 314).

3. The effectiveness of Taylor's approach is down to its phenomenological character.

    'Human thinking is situated thinking, in which any questions that can be raised only make sense against a background or framework of the taken utterly for granted' (Taylor 2003, 313).

Taylor's late works, nevertheless, contain few instances of the word *phenomenology*

Is Taylor then actually doing phenomenology, or is that reading simply a convenient one?

Can a fine-grained filiation be traced from those early works to Taylor's mature statements?

If Taylor's phenomenology is art concealing itself, what implications might that raise for the practice of phenomenology more widely?

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk

Towards a fully fledged method from self-understanding

'The agent must have some insight into the point of his activity. The insight will not be total; some things will be hidden from him. But he must have some grasp of what he is doing, that grasp which is involved in doing it' (Taylor 1978, 160).

What the agent draws upon in indubitable knowing is an 'unarticulated background' (the subject of Week 3), features of which agents themselves will often be incapable of bringing into language.

Rhetoric and style as expressive rather than arbitrary

'We have to innovate in language, and bring the limit conditions of experience to clarity in formulations which open up a zone normally outside our range of thought and attention' (Taylor 1978, 164–65).

Cf. Mulhall: 'It is as if [Taylor] is searching for the perfect subtle language that will resonate most precisely with his readers' experience, and thereby convey an insight that will attune his subjectivity with theirs, and both with the reality that the words disclose' (2025).

But does Taylor's terminological promiscuity make him a sui generis thinker, closed off from those attuned to 'the strict regimentations of sense that valid argument-forms demand' (Mulhall 2025)?

Gesturing towards Taylor's later concerns

Mulhall précising Taylor: 'The emancipation of the modern self creates a deepening sense that it is fated to get in its own way, to frustrate or subvert its own deepest impulses' (Mulhall 2025).

However much Taylor hews to methodological atheism, as Mulhall points out, Taylor's concerns are theistic. Hence, Taylor arguably uses contemporary thought (phenomenology, hermeneutics) to advance traditionalist aims.

Are Taylor's grand narratives, then, merely tendentious renderings of a God-shaped hole in the heart of contemporary Western modernity?

References

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Doing 'moral phenomenology' against naturalism

'In speaking of [a] "dominant" view I am thinking . . . of an outlook that has to some extent colonized the common sense of our civilization' (Taylor 2006, 204).

Despite its references to 'moral phenomenology' (Taylor 1989, 68, 81), *Sources of the Self* shows Taylor tending to favour terms of his own coining, such as 'BA [best account] principle' and 'hypergoods' (Taylor 1989, 58, 64)

Invoking the 'background' in ontology and morality

'Heidegger, like Kant, is arguing that the comportment to things described in the disengaged view requires for its intelligibility to be situated within an enframing and continuing stance to the world that is antithetical to it, hence that this comportment could not be original and fundamental' (Taylor 2006, 218).

Cf. 'The utilitarian lives within a moral framework which cannot be explicated by his own moral theory' (Taylor 1989, 31).

The claim here is that whether one is speaking of the physical world ('middle-sized dry goods') or abstract subjects such as one's own ideological commitments, intelligibility of reference depends on a coterminous *background* whose content is not necessarily perspicuous.

Using history as a resource for phenomenological articulation

'The articulation of modern understandings of the good has to be a historical enterprise. . . . The very fact of [our] self-definition in relation to the past induces us to re-examine this past' (Taylor 1989, 103).

Taylor's method is arguably intended to produce a 'picture' which – as Taylor says of Heidegger's work – 'puts itself into motion' (Taylor 2006, 219).

But if one accepts Taylor's premise, the question arises whether 'self-definition in relation to the past' is to be found in all times and places or is rather unique to modernity (in its various forms).

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Charles Taylor and Phenomenology
Week 4 – 7th Nov 2025

'Social imaginary' as distinct from theory (political or social)

'The notion of the "social imaginary" was meant to lift a previous frustration with too theoretical understandings of society' (Bohmann and Montero 2014, 3).

'By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode' (Taylor 2004, 23).

'Humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves' (Taylor 2004, 26).

Is the distinction to do with phenomenology?

'Moral order' as lived experience

'A moral order is more than just a set of norms; it also contains what we might call an "ontic" component, identifying features of the world that make the norms realizable' (Taylor 2004, 10).

'The new idea of moral order [from Grotius and Locke onwards] begins to inflect and reformulate the descriptions of God's providence and the order he has established among humans and in the cosmos' (Taylor 2004, 5).

We might say that Taylor delineates moral order through a kind of historicising phenomenology.

Social imaginary as method

'What all these things – "social imaginaries," "horizons," "mentalities," "moral maps," – have in common is an attempt to do some phenomenology. . . . [But] when we try to work out the "social imaginary," we are not dealing with the first-person singular but with the first-person plural' (Bohmann and Montero, 5).

Taylor in effect argues from the content of people's thoughts and beliefs without doing anything like the survey research which would be the usual way of finding out that content. How does he get away with it?

References (including for prepared remarks)

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk

Theory and method in *A Secular Age* II: The immanent frame

Secularity as the 'conditions of belief' – a phenomenological notion

A notion of the secular, that is, concerned *principally* neither with religion's official status nor with religious belief and practice in quantifiable terms but rather with 'the implicit, largely unfocussed background of [our] experience and search, its "pre-ontology," to use a Heideggerian term' (Taylor 2007, 3).

In continuity with but not identical to the social imaginary, the 'immanent frame' is a complex of suppositions and lived experiences that is common to believers and unbelievers alike – 'something we all share' (Taylor 2007, 589).

Those conditions as the possibility of 'exclusive humanism'

'I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with . . . a purely self-sufficient humanism. . . . A humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing. Of no previous society was this true' (Taylor 2007, 18).

Within the immanent frame, Taylor posits, what differentiates positions is a bias or sensitivity towards opposed 'spins,' either towards the frame's intrinsic openness (believers) or closedness (non-believers).

An eirenic concern with setting out the common scene

Even whilst 'the dawning sense in modern times that we are in a meaningless universe, that our most cherished meanings find no endorsement in the cosmos, or in the will of God, has often been described as a traumatic loss' (Taylor 2007, 587),

nevertheless 'having acquired a very different sensibility . . . we are also able to grasp the world in certain ways – as free subjects, capable of objective understanding of things – and this has lots of creative possibilities' (Taylor 2009, 93).

Does phenomenology as a method provide special resources for the fostering of good faith in truth-seeking enterprises (i.e., scholarship, theory, research)?

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk

Charles Taylor and Phenomenology

Week 6 – 21st Nov 2025

Taylor's epistemological realism

The real *contra* the 'picture'

Taylor and Dreyfus intervene in debates over (in part) how to understand the differential roles of *reasons* and *causes* in belief / knowledge formation. Their proposal is *therapeutic* – if we let go of notions entrenched in us through modern epistemology (the 'picture'), an 'unproblematic realism' comes into view (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 55).

'In perception the causal impact of the world does not simply give us beliefs that justify and are justified by other beliefs. Rather, the causal input calls up a complicated set of epistemological skills that produce a stable experience, which, in turn, inclines us to form a belief' (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 63).

'Contact' *contra* mediated knowledge

'Guided spontaneity happens inescapably and primordially at a level below the conceptual. . . . If we want to see how constraint and spontaneity come together, we have to find this in perception (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 75).

Do Dreyfus and Taylor provide a convincing account of the 'preconceptual,' or does their notion simply gesture towards a black box and effectively beg the question?

Epistemology and the 'buffered' self

'The brain-in-the vat hypothesis only looks plausible because of the force of the mediational structure, our captivity in the picture implicit in modern epistemology, which requires something to play the role of "inside" ' (Taylor 2013, 63).

Taylor defends a strong version of *embodiment* which is not confined to the domain of *middle-sized dry goods* but rather links up with social theory and all that is discussed in *A Secular Age*.

Cf. 'The rise of the buffered identity has been accompanied by an interiorization; that is, not only the Inner/Outer distinction, that between Mind and World as separate loci . . . but also the growth of a rich vocabulary of interiority, an inner realm of thought and feeling to be explored' (Taylor 2007, 539).

References

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk

Charles Taylor and Phenomenology

Week 7 – 28th Nov 2025

Disenchantment and phenomenology

'Disenchantment' in different senses

The everyday: 'In the enchanted world, charged things have a causal power which matches their incorporated meaning. [For example in] the High Renaissance. . . . Why does mercury cure venereal disease? Because this is contracted in the market, and Hermes is the God of markets' (Taylor 2011, 291)

Whilst other accounts emphasise the aspect of human cosmological solitude:

'The essential change was the translation of divinity from an *immanent* presence in human activity to a *transcendental* "other world" of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights' (Sahlins 2022, 2).

The 'goods' of disenchantment

The processes of 'Weberian rationalization,' 'post-Galilean science,' and a 'decline of religion' have made possible an empowering and vivifying form of self-consciousness which our forebears would (presumably) not have immediately grasped (Taylor 2011, 295).

[Taylor ventriloquising]: 'We are alone in the universe, and this is frightening, but it can also be exhilarating. . . . All meaning is here, in this small speck' (Taylor 2011, 295).

Others, such as Jane Bennett (in the vein of Bruno Latour), press strongly non-theistic accounts in which 'absorbing and alienating encounters with electronic, pathogenetic, bacteriological, climatological, and other forms of nonhuman agency abound today' (Bennett and Bilgrami 2021, 261).

Ethical/moral dimensions

But in a state of disenchantment, 'moral sources and the moral demands being out of phase with each other is a real problem, a real danger which we live in' (Meijer and Taylor 2021, 33).

In a different register, Bennett valorises 'discomfort in the face of forms of material agency that one can neither master nor ignore,' and avers, 'thus it is that I find ethical utility in the experience of alienation' (Bennett and Bilgrami 2021, 263).

References

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk

Phenomenology and reenchantment

A nonpropositional story of progress

Taylor tells the story of 'ethical growth in history' in terms of three large features or 'passages': 'human rights,' 'legitimate authority,' and 'battles over equality and non-discrimination' (Taylor 2024, 559, 569, 577).

But Taylor does not present progress as a set of achievements which might be listed as bullet points, nor does he offer a work of conventional history. Is he, rather, guiding the reader through an itinerary which might be called 'hermeneutic'?

Ethical growth and reenchantment

Ethics as distinct from morality: On this view, the ethical 'defines the ends we seek' (Taylor 2024, 257).

'The basic idea is that there are certain ends which are inscribed in our natures. . . . We experience them as motivationally powerful, and at the same time superior to other possible candidates for the basic ends of human life' (Taylor 2021, 812).

An interpretation: One might say that for Taylor reenchantment must involve a rebalancing, away from the unnatural conditions which have resulted from an excess of Axial forces and back (or forwards?) towards 'conformity with the [human] telos' (Taylor 2024, 554).

From phenomenology to hermeneutics?

'Defining the ends of life requires a hermeneutic inquiry, which must grope toward an adequate language in which these ends can be fully brought to light – a quest which is never fully completed' (Taylor 2024, 569).

Concluding his remarks in the special issue celebrating his 90th birthday, Taylor makes a case for the indispensability of hermeneutics. How does phenomenology *per se* go together with hermeneutics?

'The arguments here are potentially long, and always hermeneutic, as we grope our way towards a fuller and deeper ethical vision. There is no way to short-cut this process and dogmatically assert the definitive statement of the human Form' (Taylor 2021, 813).

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stevan.veljkovic@theology.ox.ac.uk