FROM PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES TAYLOR

Philippe de Lara: Your first book, in 1964, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, was a critique of behaviourism, which was thriving at the time in psychology and the other human sciences; you then published *Hegel* (1975) in English and German; your major articles on what you call 'philosophical anthropology' were published in two volumes called *Philosophical Papers* in 1985. This philosophical path then took an apparently new turn with *Sources of the Self* (1989), *Malaise of Modernity* (1991) and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (1993): these three books investigate from varying distances the situation (the 'mess', predicament) of contemporary man, in a direct and 'practical' manner, which is unusual for a philosopher. At the same time, Guy Laforest edited your writings on federalism and nationalism in Canada in a volume called *Overcoming Isolation* (1992), where your readers, at least non-Canadians, have discovered the permanence and the importance of your engagement in Canadian politics. What led you to concern yourself with the present, to become a philosopher of the contemporary situation?

Charles Taylor: It actually happened the other way around: In my youth I was involved in politics before becoming interested in philosophy, after historical studies at Montreal and a mixed curriculum at Oxford (philosophy, economics and politics). I continued to be active in politics on my return to Canada, as a member of the social-democratic party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), and I perceived an enormous gap between the discourse of science and political philosophy, and the reality of life and political passions. What I was telling my students about democracy and liberty had no connection with my life as an activist. At this time, political science was greatly influenced, in North America, by quantitative electoral sociology and the calculation of individual interests. Burning political questions had no place in this framework, for example, what we talk about these days concerning identity. The problem

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of the relations between the individual and the collective was resolved beforehand by methodological individualism. In political theory, we studied major authors and principles, but we said nothing about such relevant issues as the corruption of democracy in major bureaucratized societies, a theme I later addressed with Tocqueville. I intended to bring both sides together, to relate this intellectual tradition to current problems.

Ph de L: What were the sources and stages of this journey?

Ch T.: Of course things were not immediately apparent. There was first a Hegelian and Marxist source in the notion of alienation: what are the conditions of a *Sittlichkeit*, in Hegel's sense, in democratic societies, which is recognizable by their citizens, which would allow democracy to operate properly? Several things then pushed me towards Tocqueville. At that time, he was not ignored in America as he still was in France, but this was a general cultural reference which did not penetrate the narrow specialization of university departments. Analytical philosophy ignored politics and history, political 'scientists' were not interested in Tocqueville's unique combination of philosophy, mentalities, history and social analysis. Tocqueville was thus for a long time the blind spot of universities. The same for Max Weber. Ignored by political science, Weber had been very important for American sociology but sterilized by Parsons' system which had somehow absorbed the sociological tradition. Why read Weber and Durkheim when they had been sublated (*aufgehoben*), integrated and surpassed by Parsons? Only through a revolution in the universities did such people as Michael Mann with Weber and Francois Furet with Tocqueville, rediscover this common ground between history, politics and philosophy.

When I belatedly began to study philosophy I was disappointed by the limits of the then dominant empiricist version of analytical philosophy at Oxford, by its closure towards what I naively considered to be the essential questions of philosophy. Gilbert Ryle's case was a riddle for me. He made early contact with phenomenology, he wrote the first review in English, and a remarkable one, of *Sein und Zeit*, at a time when Heidegger was unknown. But he then withdrew into very English ways of thinking, linked to common sense and hostile to 'metaphysical profundities'. However, there are still traces of his early interests in his *Concept of Mind*, though they are covered over by a simplistic criticism of Cartesianism, which gave currency to the idea that the continental tradition raises false problems which a robust common sense can dispel. Austin had broader views, French philosophy interested him. I remember his fascination with Merleau-Ponty at the Royaumont conference in 1957.[1] On his return to Oxford, he invited me to present Merleau-Ponty's philosophy at his seminar. I began to expound on the *Phenomenology of Perception* but he stopped me at the first sentence with 'What does it mean'? He was not prepared to enter into a different philosophical style. For so many English people, what they hold to be the right philosophical style is sacred, they identify it with integrity, with good conduct. The Wittgensteinians were different. I was

very fortunate to be a pupil of Elizabeth Anscombe, who was at Oxford at the time. Oxford's good side was the freedom and liveliness of the discussions in the seminars of these great individuals. At the time, Anscombe was developing her book on intentionality, *Intention*, and this philosophy of practical rationality, inspired by Aristotle and Wittgenstein,[2] taught me a lot. Two paths thus opened up for me to escape from the empiricist yoke, and I tried to combine them by elaborating my problematic of philosophical anthropology. My first book was influenced as much by Wittgenstein as by Merleau-Ponty. There was actually an important convergence between Wittgenstein and certain themes of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. When Anscombe said about intentionality that 'we have a terribly abstract view of these questions', she was criticizing empiricist anthropology. To put it in terms I would use today, Cartesianism and empiricism require an anthropology of a disengaged agent. The disengaged thinker is faced with certain bits of objective information and evaluates them. This is a hyper-contemplative view because it doesn't leave any room for an engaged understanding. In two different but convergent ways, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein II criticized the disengaged subject: each re-situated it in his own way. Wittgenstein moved from a subject supposedly free to invent new words in language by directly confronting the object it wants to baptize with a new word, to one which actually relies on a dense network of language games, which alone can give meaning to the activity of naming something. The subject is not master of its speech but is rather indebted to the linguistic community of the form of life within which language has meaning. For his part, Merleau-Ponty vindicated the unavoidable role of the lived body in our knowledge of the world. These two analyses are complementary.

Ph. de L.: You did not refer to Merleau-Ponty in *The Explanation of Behaviour* and we can read and understand this book without him. Were any other British philosophers receptive to post-Heideggerian phenomenology?

Ch. T.: Not at all. My colleagues were actually very surprised to learn that Merleau-Ponty was an essential reference point for this book. I took on the challenge of reformulating Merleau-Ponty's ideas in the rigorous style esteemed by Austin and others, not without good reason. It was not only the empiricists who ignored phenomenology. Those influenced by St Thomas and medieval philosophy, such as Anthony Kenny and Peter Geach, likewise considered this tradition as an exotic and uninteresting one. There were some marginal exceptions such as Stuart Hampshire and Iris Murdoch, who wrote a book on Sartre, but on the whole, there was no interest in Husserl and phenomenology.

I believed from the outset that philosophical anthropology passed through history while for analytical philosophers philosophy is a wholly contemporary undertaking. They read Plato or Kant as if they had written the day before yesterday. Merleau-Ponty convinced me that this path was sterile in the long run. For him you could not philosophize without doing the history of philosophy and vice versa.

In this project of a history of modernity Hegel is obviously unavoidable because he was the first to have attempted a simultaneously genetic and philosophical explanation of his age. The enlightenment theories of progress do not have this depth. There is an outline of this perspective in Ferguson and the Scottish enlightenment philosophers, but it is Hegel who undertook to think philosophically the diversity of cultures and their history. We cannot address the history of modernity without first settling accounts with Hegel.

A lot of things written between my book on Hegel and *Sources of the Self* are criticisms of positivism in the human sciences (political science, anthropology, psychology). But I also had to comprehend why ideas I considered false such as empiricism or games theory applied to the human sciences, or modelling thought on a computer, were resistant to otherwise very convincing criticisms, something which had to go by way of an understanding of modern culture, in so far as it is the source of the persuasive force of these false conceptions. This was not to denounce a false consciousness, in the form of Marxist criticism, but to separate all the layers of the system of arguments which sustain these beliefs, and bring its defects to light. Faced with questioners who you believe to be wrong, you must tell them why you believe they are wrong.

Ph. de L: This comes across clearly in a lot of your articles, written in a dialogical style, where the strength of your argument arises from the presentation of a recognizable and as solid as possible version of the opposing thesis. You always seek to separate what is incoherent or unacceptable in the opposing thesis *from its own point of view.* For example, by showing that utilitarian anthropology cannot satisfy the liberal ethos which usually adopts it, or that relativism in anthropology (using the term here to mean a discipline) flounders in an ethnocentrism that it wants to condemn.

Ch. T.: The third source of my work has been the desire to connect philosophical anthropology and actual politics. In the text on 'the politics of recognition' I try to show the historical depth of the movement which is causing us today to be concerned with identity and recognition, with the aim of clarifying the conflicts in our societies and perhaps helping us to find some as yet unnoticed solutions. I tried to explain this in greater detail at the Cerisy conference.[3] Briefly, I believe that the terms 'identity' and 'recognition' are closely linked in the semantic field of modern politics. But this field assumes deep changes in our secular ways of thinking. To take one instance: what we call identity has become the locus of redefinitions which are imagined as such. Now, a (re)definition of identity cannot be made without questioners whose recognition or lack of it could be decisive for the entire process. Another major change is that in our times the unchallengeable questioners are often to be found outside the group. Also the attempt at redefinition becomes more fragile, more vulnerable. The case of blacks in the United States seems to me exemplary in this regard, as has been the situation of French Canadians.

Ph. de L: Your notion of the politics of recognition is addressed directly to contemporary North-American societies. How did you formulate the political question 20 or 30 years ago?

Ch T.: At the beginning of the 1960s we did not yet speak of recognition, for example, in the Civil Rights movement in the United States, but I have experienced the Quebec-Canada problem from early childhood. I have lived astride these two worlds which do not understand each other. And it was clear to me that there were not only very concrete inequalities and injustices, such as the different wage levels between English and French speakers, or the prohibition to speak French in certain enterprises, but that the very understandable grievances of French Canadians were made more acute and complex by the perception they were not acknowledged by the English speaking world. They wanted to be recognized as a community and not as a collection of French speaking individuals. Now, from the Hobbesian viewpoint of language as a simple instrument of communication, common among English speakers, this insistence on 'identity' is incomprehensible.

De Gaulle to his credit understood that this small minority scorned by its English partner, and forgotten or mythologized by France, had a huge need for recognition. De Gaulle was one of the great players in the theatre of politics, and not just by this century's standards. The famous slogan 'Let Quebec be free' was not an improvization made on the spur of the moment but the culmination of a series of carefully staged symbolic acts. When he came in 1967 on a boat called The Colbert, De Gaulle, contrary to popular belief, did not raise the Canadian flag beside the French flag; instead of berthing at Quebec he stopped a little further away, where the English arrived before the defeat of Montcalm, at the battle of Abraham plains. The conquest was thus symbolically wiped out! Then he did not go directly to Montreal but triumphantly followed an old way called 'The King's way'. His speech in the marketplace was the climax of a carefully staged programme. We were not surprised, we expected it. We knew something important was going to happen. Why? Because this world figure had just said to the Quebec people 'You exist'. So I experienced the reality of recognition before I knew the corresponding language for it.

Ph. de L.: How could this dimension be grasped through the concepts of socialist politics at the time? The political, unionist, anti-nationalist and anti-identity left was strong at the time of Duplessis' authoritarian conservative Quebec, but it was completely swept away by what has been called the 'quiet revolution'. In no time at all abstract universalists became fervent nationalists. The transformation of Quebec nationalism was overwhelming. Churches rapidly emptied. A seemingly ineradicable reactionary nationalism suddenly collapsed, lifting the obstacle between the left and the national aspiration. How were the left and English speaking liberals to react? Pierre Trudeau totally rejected the new nationalism. Trudeau had always detested the provincialism and narrowness of the French speaking world and he thus embodied the left

under Duplessis. There was a dramatic break with his friends, beginning with Rene Leveque, each believing the other had betrayed him. Almost the entire left in Quebec rejoined the Quebec party. Initially, the few who like myself remained in the NDP succeeded in persuading it to adopt the politics of special status, despite Trudeau's popularity with the left. This line was important for a political generation, but for the following generation Trudeau won the day. The path of conciliation, of mutual recognition between French and English speakers, is, however, the only viable one. Philosophy is important in this struggle lest this dimension of recognition be forgotten. If it is only discussed in terms of redistribution, of institutional equality, the problems of recognition will re-emerge in a perverse way. After the mid-1960s, my philosophical labour sought in some way to recover, to enlarge, this path which had become a minority one on the Canadian political scene.

Ph. de L.: Let us get back to the 'politics of recognition'. However deep-rooted it may be in the logic of democracy, are not the communities' or pseudo-communities' claims to identity a grave danger to democratic politics, to the extent that they make modes of mutual recognition based on equality and compromise, the pillars of democracy in the age of the welfare state, impossible, just as they tend to foster intolerance, the war of rights and the breakdown of the 'community of citizens'?

Ch. T.: In any walk of life which is the source of apparently insoluble troubles, conflicts, dilemmas – such as sexuality, nationalism, recognition – there is always a temptation to be thrifty in this regard. Certain Indian friends assure me that life would be much easier and harmonious if all marriages were arranged by the parents and love had no initial role! They say they do not have the high number of divorces, the dissatisfaction and frustration which continue to grow in the West and that we should prohibit marriages based on love. To which I reply that at bottom they may be right, that our lives would be more harmonious without certain aspirations, but that their advice has come too late. These aspirations are such an integral part of our way of being in our civilization that we cannot simply declare them inoperative one fine day.

To those who tell us that the politics of recognition might inflame intercommunity relationships, give rise to conflicts much more difficult to manage than diverging interest, I would make roughly the same response. If we set aside everything that derives from identity and the troubles and conflicts related to it, the world would seem more simple and manageable. But I strongly doubt the realism of any project which consists in trying to convince our co-citizens to 'think of something else'. Those whose identity is solid will applaud you but this is because they are already thinking of something else. Those whose identity is precarious will see this as another way to not take them seriously.

I believe that an understanding of the bases of the preoccupation with identity of so many of our contemporaries would show that it is deeply rooted in modern society and culture. At least that is what I would like to establish.

Ph. de L.: Another important source in your work is Herder, which smacks of heresy for certain intelligent people, but whose philosophical and historical importance you have restored.

Ch. T.: My attraction to Herder was prepared long ago by my situation in Quebec, where two languages as well as two philosophies of language, came face to face: while English speakers considered language an instrument and did not understand why someone would refuse to adopt the most widely used instrument, due to its use in North America and the rest of the world, for French speakers language constitutes a way of being in the world. Having belonged to a family mixed for several generations, it always seemed obvious to me that language is more than an instrument, that each language carries its own sense of humor, conception of the world etc. Hence my interest for language and for the romantic philosophy of language, which criticized the instrumentalist philosophy of Hobbes, Locke or Condillac. The three key writers are Hamann, Herder and Humboldt. How can we make different groups co-exist once we recognize that languages convey different identities? This is the other side of Herder's importance, the idea that each individual has its own way of being, shaped in its culture, that each identity is unique and needs to be realized within the horizon of a language, a culture. Herder's reaction, which defends the idea that Germans have their own poetics, its irreplaceable value, in a Germany where everyone accepted that French is the language of culture, where Frederick II invited Maupertuis to Berlin to establish the Academy, recalls the Quebec drama in striking fashion, if only because French was the dominant language at the time. For Herder, 'each human being has its own measure'. For the first time, the difference between two beings is not only between the best and the worst, each has its own value. But this identity, because it is original, is to be defined, it is not given, hence the importance of the cultural horizon within which it is formed. This is the crux of the language of identity.

Ph. de L.: In general, romanticism is understood as a 'reaction', foreign to the emancipation of the modern subject, while for you Herder and romanticism in general are a constituting moment for modernity, for the same reason as the enlightenment. How can you link Herder's romantic individual with democratic individualism, inspired by a passion for equality rather than that of identity?

Ch. T.: Individualism as such is not an idea completely on its own. It goes with a new conception of sociality. It is the counterpart of the collapse of hierarchical society, of egalitarian society and the market economy. The social forms of equality and the market have promoted a form of individualism which Tocqueville has described and criticized. Tocqueville was haunted by the fragmentation, the solitude of the democratic individual. What mediations can protect the modes of solidarity of traditional society, in a society that I can directly access, where I am directly a citizen of my country, not by the intermediary of an order of birth or a local corporation? Now, and

this might not have occurred, another figure appeared within this initial individualism, with Herderian individualism. It presupposed the first, for the conception of equal and different groups or people presupposes that hierarchical difference had disappeared. Herder himself was almost an anarchist, he was deeply interested in popular culture (in German, as in almost all languages, the word people, *Volk*, simultaneously designates both the group as a whole and the 'common social strata'). He was far removed from the hierarchical Prussian order. Romantic individualism therefore presupposes democratic society, but it adds to the market and to equality a third form of sociality, the national community, where the relations of the individual to the community are not only utilitarian, as in liberal political philosophy, for the individual needs a shared horizon, particularly language, to constitute his or her identity. This second individualism is not without its dangers, such as aggressive nationalism, but also corrosive effects, in the name of an exclusive understanding of the requirement of faithfulness to oneself, to the detriment of any other ties. The increase in divorce in democratic societies is a manifestation of this drift to authenticity. The paradoxical encounter of these two individualisms constitutes modernity and its internal tensions. Now the majority of liberals have not understood this and have identified romanticism with reaction. There were of course reactionary romantics such as Joseph de Maistre, but romanticism is first of all inscribed in the dynamics of democracy. Mill is an example of someone who, via Humboldt, integrated this Herderian dimension of authenticity.

Ph. de L.: You say this might not have occurred, but it is tempting to understand this history as an inevitable dialectic, programmed from the outset. In your style of enquiry about the history of the subject, the relations between necessary and contingent (the 'transcendental' and the 'historical'), between continuity and discontinuity, between logical development and unexpected bifurcation are very subtle. This question has moreover been widely discussed in regard to your *Sources of the Self* which lends itself to a genealogical reading, to a reading in terms of philosophy of history, namely to a transhistorical anthropology, modern identity being only a manifestation of universal constants of being-human.

Ch. T.: The book is genealogical. I start from the present situation, from formative ideas, from our conflicting forms of self-understanding, and I try to unearth certain earlier forms from which they arise, so as to bring to light hidden aspects which allow new possibilities. So it is not a complete historical reconstruction, it is a very selective step backwards to rediscover certain sources. The major hazard for the history of ideas is anachronism. For example, if we take the philosophy of the social contract purely as the anteroom of democracy, you can lose the genealogical interest in favour of a dull philosophy of history. Now, these sources can only tell us something about ourselves if we grasp them in their differences, and not as another way of saying the same thing. I have resisted this danger, successfully I hope. Paul

Ricoeur spoke at Cerisy of a 'transhistorical' dimension of *Sources of the Self.* It is not a matter of researching ahistorical permanent structures, but of giving an account of the historical denseness of the present, of elements of the past which are still active. We do not have to invoke psychoanalysis to imagine that past experiences can play a very important role in our present life (just as they can be completely forgotten). Many people conceive their attachment to modern values, freedom, rights, starting from the memory of a wrenching, emancipation from nasty earlier societies. Now the better we understand what is useful here as a contrast, the better we understand the meaning of the revolution from which it has sprung, and the better we understand ourselves.

I believe it is possible to formulate truly transhistorical truths on the human subject. It could be argued that the above-mentioned analyses by Merleau-Ponty on the lived body, or by Wittgenstein on the situation of all linguistic activity within language games and life forms, constitute very convincing steps in this direction.

There are certainly other candidates for this transhistorical status, of 'truisms' of contemporary common sense such as the claim that every human being understands him or herself as an individual in relation to other individuals; or that everybody defines his or her own identity. But on closer examination these 'constants' turn out to be rooted in the culture of our age. When we escape from the prison of our perspective, the ground shakes under our feet, at least at the start. We are forced to redefine the domain of the transhistorical and then, to imagine the transformations from which have come notions such as the 'individual', 'identity' and the 'self' in keeping with our new definition of what is for all ages. Of course this work is always contestable. This is what I have tried to do in *Sources*, in keeping with an analysis of the locations of good in human life. But I am only too aware of the objections that can be made to this approach.

Ph. de L.: Two visions of religion seem to clash in your book: on the one hand, the Weberian idea of disenchantment, hence the scheme of the end of religion and, on the other hand, the actuality of the religious source for the modern subject, what you call theism.

Ch. T.: They complement each other. Marcel Gauchet is right to say that Christianity is a religion for leaving religion, a religion which has opened the possibility of its own negation.[4] But certain aspects of religion remain in the forms which have succeeded it. As distinct from what happened in the Roman world, the new lay civilization has not simply gone beyond or swallowed up religion. The situation is more the following: we are leaving Christianity and we are in a civilization where nothing occupies this space, where mutually incompatible options quarrel. It is impossible in our days to be a Christian, atheist, or anything else, without a degree of doubt. Our situation is characterized by this instability, much more than by the idea that secularism has swept away religion as, for example, Islam has swept away Christianity in certain countries.

Ph. de L.: What is the content of this theism?

Ch. T.: Secularization does not mean the disappearance of the religious. I would first like to say that to see in Locke's deism a stage towards atheism is an anachronism of the type that I condemn and to which I fear Leo Strauss and his disciples have fallen victim. You project what you believe to be the end of a process into all previous stages, and as a result, not only do you distort history, but you lose sight of the resources that this history, shown in its true complexity, offers us. Classical deism is not masked irreligion, its basis is a conception of providence, Today, this conception is forever buried, it is not a possible source for us, but other forms of religion retain their currency. We must reflect on the fact that our civilization demands a lot of 'philanthropy', in the broad sense, from us: concern for one's neighbour at a global level, we must make room for everyone, share scarce resources, the demands of equality arise etc. Hence the danger, clearly seen by Nietzsche: if we do not at the same time see the human individual as being important in itself, these demands become very dangerous, for they can lead to contempt for the human being, to the extent that it seems to fall short of this required standard. 'Universal benevolence' is transformed into scorn. This downgrading then legitimates active minorities taking charge, being authorized to pitilessly shape human material, as has happened regularly during this century. The imperatives we set for ourselves should therefore be offset by a vision of the human being as something remarkable, admirable, despite all its defects and shortcomings. This will not resolve our anxieties, but will help us fulfil the obligations we impose on ourselves. Otherwise, if we do not find the moral sources allowing us to recognize the value of man, Nietzsche is right: the idea of torturing ourselves to be more just and more equal is only a way of slandering and despising ourselves.

I ask at the end of my book if Christian spirituality, based on *agape*, would not provide a stronger foundation for this value than many visions. This is a question rather than a statement; in any case it is not a formula for suppressing our troubles, for making life easier, something which is impossible.

Notes

This interview was published in French in *Le Débat*, no. 89 (1996): it is published here with the permission of the editors of that journal. The interview has been translated by Steve Rothnie.

1. *La Philosophie analytique*, Paris, Minuit, 1963. An encounter between French philosophy of the time (Merleau-Ponty, Wahl, Alquie), and the heavyweights of analytical philosophy (Austin, Ryle, Quine, Strawson).
2. Vincent Descombes's recent book *La Denrée mentale* (Paris, Minuit, 1995) contains an exposition and an original use of this school.
3. 'L'interprétation de l'identité moderne' conference on Charles Taylor at Cerisy in June 1995; proceedings to be published by Editions de Cerf.
4. M. Gauchet (1977), *The Disenchantment of the World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.