

Charles Taylor *Dilemmas and Connections, Selected Essays*. Harvard University Press, 408pp., 29.95

Charles Taylor was for some years the Chichele Professor of Social and Political theory in Oxford, and a Fellow of All Souls College. A Canadian, he is now Professor emeritus at McGill University. He has been a winner of the Templeton prize for affirming life's spiritual dimensions—a recognition that, with noticeable lack of irony, takes the form of a cash prize of a million pounds sterling—and the Kyoto prize of half a million dollars for something similar. The essays collected in this volume cover a period of around the last fifteen years.

I should say at the outset that I may not be his ideal reader. Taylor, a practicing Roman Catholic, is a hand-wringing, pessimistic, religious spirit; I am a moderately cheerful pragmatist. Taylor surveys wide sweeps of history, standing on a mountaintop from which he sees darkly such things as the Modern Self, the failure of the Enlightenment, the decline of community, the loss of transcendence, and other large and regrettable elements in the march of the West. I am more of a miniaturist; I find these large vistas go all blurry. Taylor, like Alasdair MacIntyre, with whom he is inevitably compared, looks with a nostalgic eye on the enchantments of previous times, and especially the Middle Ages. I am happier where I am, however pleasant a summer day haymaking la Breughel might once have been. I cannot help reflecting that the best available statistics show that I am a hundred times less likely to be murdered in 2011 than I would have been in those times, and I do not mind trading a little bit of community and transcendence for that, to say nothing of modern dentistry and the rest.

The first essay salutes Iris Murdoch as a pioneer, at least among the ranks of Anglo-American philosophers, in her appreciation of real ethics. Taylor places her on the highest of three tiers. The most narrow kind of moral philosopher concentrates on obligations, rights and justice. A more realistic kind brings in considerations of goodness and flourishing, and what it is to live a good kind of life, which may well be one including a lot more than simply fulfilling obligations. But Murdoch, according to Taylor, takes us yet higher to the consideration of a good which would be beyond life's good that we might sometimes more appropriately respond to in suffering and death. Perhaps fortunately Taylor remains vague on what kind of good this might be, although he seems to think that Buddhists are at one with Christians in making room for it, which I should have thought doubtful. Christianity's masochistic pride in pointless suffering is not very much like Buddhism's ideal of escaping from suffering altogether.

There are certainly things in life to which suffering is an appropriate response: grieving is a kind of suffering, and when we lose friends and loved ones a decent measure of it is the appropriate response. But the loss is not itself a good, or at least, is not so regarded by the one who grieves. So what goods could Taylor possibly have in mind? A good film? A good meal? A good action? The look, he just succoured that poor beggar. What kindness. I had better flog myself. Christianity itself only celebrates suffering as some kind of just response to the facts of our fallen nature, and those facts are not in themselves good, for it is guilt about them that fuels Catholicism's delight in the pornography of suffering. But just as annoying is the dim light, the way in which gestures that are supposed to point us towards something Higher, something Transcendental, only appear to do so because there is no specificity about what that might actually be. To be fair to Taylor, this is a trick to which Iris

Murdoch was herself chronically addicted: there is very little in *Metaphysics and Morals* which survives even a casual attempt at focus (which is particularly annoying since the official message of the book is that close vision is an especially Good Thing).

If Taylor's third tier of ethics is lost in fog, nevertheless he has a keen eye for the problems of poor humanity. He sees that the best intentions can lead to the worst outcomes, citing Dostoevsky's grim remark that "Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived an unlimited despotism." Human shortcomings are a presence that stalks these essays, and they can lead him to say interesting things, for instance about the dynamics of terrorism, or the ways in which the disappointments that meet the best intentions can turn things very sour. Utopianism soon tries to find scapegoats for its failures, as the grim history of the French Revolution, Russia under Lenin and Stalin, or Cambodia under Pol Pot all illustrate. He is suitably even-handed, acknowledging that "The transformation of high ideals into brutal practice was illustrated lavishly in Christendom." Unfortunately, there are no recipes for stopping it happening again, nor guarantees that it will not. Narrow rationalism will not protect us. There is only the cloak of faith.

I hope few readers of this periodical will agree with that. Narrow rationalism sounds bad, of course. But exercises of reason informed by human awareness, civility and compassion have brought us everyday decencies, together with structures of laws, and rights, and national and even international safety devices, that actually do amount to progress. From Taylor's Olympian standpoint the small, incremental, compromising, faltering but steady drip of improvement is completely invisible. Unrealistic hopes may indeed turn into brutal practice, but small, hopeful, clear-sighted, compassionate working to improve the human lot is a good deal less vulnerable.

The art of motorcycle maintenance cannot be practiced with hands clasped in prayer.
It needs very little zen, but only a cheerful willingness to learn the trade and get on with it.
So does the art of social maintenance, even if you win no prizes for saying so.

Simon Blackburn