
Charles Taylor's *Languge/Parole* and Alasdair MacIntyre's "Networks of Giving and Receiving" as a Foundation for a Positive Anti-Atomist Political Theory

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It is often taken to be a truism of contemporary political philosophy that the "communitarians" of the second half of the 20th century were advocating a political position in opposition to that of political liberalism. While philosophers who have been labeled as communitarians – namely Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer – routinely eschew the label and the contrast drawn with liberals, the perception of a dichotomy persists. But a more careful reading of the philosophy of communitarians shows that these thinkers are not necessarily opposed to liberalism, but rather "atomism," which Charles Taylor defines as "a vision of society in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfilment (sic) of ends which [are] primarily individual."ⁱ

A major critique, however, of the opponents of atomism is that they have yet to put forth an adequate positive alternative to atomism. While thinkers like Sandel, Taylor, and MacIntyre have

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worked hard to show why atomism is a flawed political approach, and while Michael Walzer has put forth a positive theory in *Spheres of Justice* that largely draws from atomist presuppositions, a clear positive anti-atomist doctrine has as of yet not been put forth.

However, some important groundwork has been laid. A key point of agreement amongst these philosophers is that ethical-political systems depend on certain metaphysical conceptions of the human person. As Michael Sandel puts it, “our practices and institutions are embodiments of theory. To engage in a political practice is already to stand in relation to theory.”ⁱⁱ Some metaphysical understanding of the human person is required to provide a foundation for any positive anti-atomist political theory. This paper will take two theories, one an analogy from language used by Charles Taylor and another an explanation of basic qualities of human society put forth by Alasdair MacIntyre, and argue that they provide a foundation on which a positive anti-atomist political theory can be constructed.

MacIntyre on Human Dependence

Before addressing the themes that emerge from the two theories, I will first explain the two theories as they are put forth by MacIntyre and Taylor. Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of “networks of giving and receiving” comes from his book *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. This book marks MacIntyre’s full shift from his original thesis in *After Virtue* claiming that the need for the virtues can be culturally determined to the much stronger claim that the virtues that are needed for human flourishing are essentially tied to the needs of human nature. In order to explain this, MacIntyre appeals to the realities of human dependence. He presents his work as a challenge to the history of philosophy, a history riddled with assumptions of the “ability” of humans:

From Plato to Moore and since there are usually, with some rare exceptions, only passing references to human vulnerability and affliction and to

the connections between them and our dependence on others...And when the ill, the injured and the otherwise disabled *are* (emphasis in original) presented in the pages of moral philosophy books, it is almost always exclusively as possible subjects of benevolence by moral agents who are themselves presented as though they were continuously rational, healthy and untroubled.ⁱⁱⁱ

MacIntyre's claim is that we are, by our human nature, locked in what he terms "networks of giving and receiving." At some times (notably in developmental stages, periods of illness, and old age), we are bound by our limited nature and must depend on the aid of others. At others, we serve as the providers of aid by helping others in their times of dependence.

Further, MacIntyre argues that participation in these networks of giving and receiving are essential to human flourishing. Not only do "we become independent practical reasoners through participation in a set of relationships to certain particular others who are able to give us what we need,"^{iv} but we must also "understand that what [we are] called upon to give may be quite disproportionate to what [we] have received and that those to whom [we are] called upon to give may well be those from whom [we] shall receive nothing."^v Thus, human flourishing grows not only out of acknowledging the dependence one has on others, but also in acknowledging the obligation one then has to aid others in their times of dependence.

Taylor on Social Embeddedness

Taylor's take on human flourishing can be found in his essay "Irreducibly Social Goods." Here, he argues that there are certain goods that cannot be fully described in reference to particular individuals, but only towards more than one individual. He contrasts these irreducibly social goods with the concept of a "public good," or a good that could theoretically apply solely to individuals. With this distinction, he explains that public goods are simply private goods that are practically acquired through public activity while irreducibly social goods cannot be attained but

through social means. His example to expose this distinction is that of the difference between the good of national defense and the good of friendship. National defense is a public good, or a good that is practically acquired through public activity but theoretically could exist on an individual basis. If a household were to raise its own army, it could, at least in theory, protect itself and only itself. Friendship, on the other hand, is a good that can only be experienced socially. A friendship that is experienced by a single individual would not be seen as a good, but rather as a misunderstanding of the very definition of what it is to have a friendship.

Of special importance to this essay, Taylor goes on to take a distinction from the linguistic world and apply it to the development of individuality. The concept he borrows is that of *langue* and *parole* first put forth by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. According to Saussure, "language has an individual aspect and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other."^{vi} In the same way that Saussure argues that language is both social and individual, Taylor argues that identity is as well.

Saussure explains the social and individual aspects of language as embedded in a system of interaction between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the shared background of rules and lexicon of a language that make up the foundation on which a language is built. Any instance of the language is termed *parole*, or the usage of the *langue* in an actual speech act. Any act of *parole* is dependent on the *langue* since it needs to follow certain rules in order to be understood in a speech context. *Parole*, however, can also go back and change the *langue* by providing new twists on how to use language. Thus, instances must be built off the rules already provided but can also change those same rules.

In this analogy with the Saussurian distinction, culture plays the part of *langue* and the individual plays the part of the *parole*. Individual identity necessarily grows out of a culture and thus depends on that culture to come into being. But just as *parole* can then go back and alter *langue* in Saussure's language distinction, so too can (and almost inevitably *will*) an individual change the

culture that the individual comes out of. Thus, the individual completes the dialectic by returning to the culture and working to make some sort of impact on it.

These two systems can be seen as complementing one another in order to provide the basis for a positive anti-atomist political theory. This basis consists of two essential metaphysical principles: human independence in identity construction and human interdependence in realizing goods and flourishing.

Identity Construction

We will first consider the part that interdependence plays in identity construction in both theories. This comes to light in the *langue/parole* distinction in the explanation of how *parole* comes into being. According to Taylor, “the acts of *parole* all presuppose the existence of *langue*.”^{vii} Here, he is referring to instances within a language. No statement can be made in any meaningful way if there is not a *langue* first for the statement to stand on. Even if someone were to emit sounds that directly mirrored a sentence from another language, if that someone did not know the language then we would not consider that person to be truly engaging in that language with that emission of sound.

The importance of culture in the development of an individual can be seen by the counterexample of feral children. A feral child is a child who develops in isolation from human society. While some feral children, if found at a young enough age, can be raised to grow out of many of their animalistic tendencies, most feral children are never able to grow into “normal” capacities of reasoning, language, and empathy. The example of feral children undergirds the essential social nature of human development that depends on a culture and the nurture of others in order to be fulfilled.

MacIntyre’s view falls in line with this reasoning. “Networks of giving and receiving” is about taking into account the fact that human beings depend on others throughout their developmental stages in order to grow into independent practical reasoners and to establish personal identities. MacIntyre makes this clear when he says “We become independent practical reasoners through

participation in a set of relationships to certain particular others who are able to give us what we need.”^{viii}

But further than this, MacIntyre does not underplay the importance of culture in the successful construction of individual identities. MacIntyre makes it clear that “defective systems of social relationships are apt to produce defective character.”^{ix} Thus, it is not only important that human beings have positive relationships with individuals towards their development, but that these positive relationships exist upon a background of culture that reinforces the individual relationships of note.

Human Flourishing

On the other end of the construction of identity is the end of identity: the pursuit of human flourishing. Both the *langue/parole* distinction as well as networks of giving and receiving show a system in which human flourishing is intimately involved. Since the concept of human flourishing is foundationally Aristotelian, I will begin with an explanation of how contemporary Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre’s networks of giving and receiving treats human flourishing.

MacIntyre follows Aristotle’s line of reasoning in maintaining that human flourishing is a matter of realization of goods. On the one hand, individuals must grow into independent practical reasoners in order to engage in decision-making as to how to fulfill goods. But more than that, people must find good through taking part in the good of others.

So each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us through periods of disability to become ourselves the kind of human being — through acquisition and exercise of the virtues — who makes the good of others her or his good, and this not because we have calculated that, only if we help others, will they help us, in some trading of advantage for advantage.^x

Thus, obtaining the goods that lead to human flourishing is something that will take place when one makes others’ ends

one's own ends rather than making others' ends simply a means to one's own ends. MacIntyre later says that "the individual in order not just to pursue, but even to define her or his good in concrete terms has first to recognize the goods of the community as goods that she or he must make her own."^{xi} The realization of dependence and the reconciliation of the needs of others becomes a crucial part of flourishing in networks of giving in receiving. Note that MacIntyre here also hints at the importance of community *input* on the value of goods towards the individual when saying that others are required to allow an individual to "define her or his good in concrete terms."

In order to understand how *langue/parole* gives the same account of human interdependence that networks of giving and receiving does, it is instructive to consider the relationship as a Hegelian dialectic. The barebones of the dialectic run like this: the *langue* preexists an act of *parole*, and the *parole* emerges as an instance of the *langue*. The fulfillment of the dialectic is for the *parole* to then make an impact that changes the *langue*, thus doubling back and taking part in the *langue*.

Thus also do human beings work in such a manner. We grow out of the *langue* of culture, dependent on the culture around us to construct an individual identity, but that identity ultimately must be expressed through changing the culture it grew out of. This may be in a big, fundamental way or in a small, locally significant way, but a human life that does not ultimately make any change in the culture it is a part of is a human life unfulfilled.

For Taylor, this embeddedness of the concept of human flourishing is also related to irreducibly social goods. Goods such as community, marriage, and friendship can only be realized in concert with others. There is no such thing as a community of one, or a friendship shared between one person. Further, these goods are fundamentally important to human nature, and just like MacIntyre's "common goods," can only be achieved by investing in them as ends in themselves rather than means towards a private good. As distinctly social animals, exposure to irreducibly social goods figures strongly into the ability of human beings to flourish.

Differences Between the Theories

While the two theories complement each other to a significant extent, there are also some instances in which the two theories seem, on surface level, inconsistent. This section will explain the reason these discrepancies exist and show why the two theories do not have any differences that are irreconcilable.

The first discrepancy of note is that of differing foci of relationships within the theories. For Taylor's theory of *langue* and *parole*, the key relationship is between the individual and the culture. An individual both grows out of a culture but also takes part in the changing of that culture. MacIntyre's account of interdependence, however, is much more concerned with the interactions between individuals than the interactions between the individual and a culture. While these could be seen as ideas in conflict, it would be a more true reading of the two thinkers to see the two theories as complementing one another by fleshing out ideas alluded to in passing by one another.

In chapter four of *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre's account of identity formation draws from George Herbert Mead's behaviorist account of the formation of the self. While this can be accounted for by MacIntyre's biological approach (focused on comparison of human interdependence with that of other animals), a connection must still be made within MacIntyre's system between identity and culture in order to draw a proper connection between the two theories.

Upon closer inspection, however, MacIntyre reveals that practices of individuals and exercise of individuality are dependent on a background of cultural practices, a claim that mirrors Taylor's account of *langue*. This becomes obvious with MacIntyre's explanation of common goods and individual goods.

According to MacIntyre, the pursuit of a personal good cannot be fulfilled unless it takes place within the context of a common good. "The good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate in those relationships."^{xii} This ties in intimately with MacIntyre's account of reciprocity. Reciprocity, for MacIntyre, is not about giving back in

equal quantity to the people from whom one receives, but sometimes requires paying forward to others in disproportionate amounts.^{xiii}

Reliance on common goods is not only about reciprocity, though: it goes deeper than that. Let us return to a quote from *Dependent Rational Animals* provided earlier: “the individual in order not just to pursue, but even to define his or her good in concrete terms has first to recognize the goods of the community as goods that she or he must make her own.”^{xiv} According to MacIntyre, there must be a background of value in order for an individual to even do as much as define a good for itself.

The second apparent discrepancy between the two theories is the treatment of the individual in the two doctrines. This, too, is a discrepancy that quite naturally comes out of the differing methodologies of the two thinkers. Taylor is a scholar of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French Hegelian who provides a transcendental argument about embodied agency.^{xv} The transcendental argument unfolds as follows. According to Merleau-Ponty, “to be a subject is to be aware of the world.”^{xvi} Thus, our status as subjects is dependent on a world around us that provides corresponding objects. Taylor, therefore, is adopting a view of the individual as an “embodied agent,” distinct from any conception of human nature.

MacIntyre, on the other hand, is coming from a biologically based methodology. His understanding of the individual as a “dependent rational animal” is rooted in understanding human beings “as included in the class of animals.”^{xvii} Rationality is one key quality of human beings that sets us apart from other animals.^{xviii} Here, MacIntyre is providing an understanding of the individual that is based on how we talk about human beings as a biological species of animal.

While these two accounts are no doubt distinct in nature, they also fit together nicely when keying in on MacIntyre’s definition of “dependence.” Here, MacIntyre’s adoption of developmental explanations similar to that of George Herbert Mead’s provides us a path for reconciliation. MacIntyre argues that we need others in order to gain thoughts and self-awareness.^{xix} It is

through interaction with these others that we are then able to find a sense of self. Just as Mealeau-Ponty argued that the world provides objects that allow us to become a subject, MacIntyre channels Mead in order to show that we must be aware of others in order to gain a sense of selfhood. Thus, MacIntyre's behavioral explanation of how identity is constructed comes very close to the transcendental argument of Merleau-Ponty that Taylor adopts.

Lastly, the writings of the two thinkers show different levels of clarity on their stances in regards to the argument that ethical/political systems can indeed be grounded in metaphysical truths concerning the human person. While MacIntyre is arguing a strong case for metaphysical foundationalism (hoping to ground an account of human ethical-political systems based on human flourishing in a metaphysical biology of human nature), Taylor's *langue/parole* distinction in "Irreducibly Social Goods" does not necessarily lend itself to espousing such a position. If Taylor is found to be an opponent of methodological foundationalism, then that would be a fatal blow to the project of reconciling *langue/parole* and networks of giving and receiving as a basis for a political theory.

Luckily, there is sufficient evidence in Taylor's other work to suggest that he supports the thesis of metaphysical foundationalism. This becomes most apparent in Taylor's treatment of the role of recognition in the life of the human person. According to Taylor,

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* (italics in original) of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.^{xx}

Here Taylor argues that a society that ignores the essentially human needs of its members will leave these members "damaged," thus implying that the society has an obligation to make sure that its members receive the recognition necessary to form healthy

identities. This line of argument transposes very well onto the *langue/parole* distinction. If we, as embodied agents, come from the culture and then find fulfillment in expressing ourselves within the culture, then society has a certain obligation to reinforce that culture and mold it in a way that is beneficial to its members. This is a foundationalist claim that draws an obligation of human society from a fact about the human person and suggests that Taylor is not hostile to the foundationalist approach.

Two Metaphysical Principles

Above, one can see that the similarities between MacIntyre's "networks of giving and receiving" and Taylor's adoption of Saussure's *langue/parole* provide two metaphysical ballasts for a positive anti-atomist political theory. First, individuals are not atomistically self-reliant in construction of selfhood, but rather are dependent on both individual others and on their culture in respect to their coming into being as selves with distinct, individual identities. Second, individuals cannot atomistically pursue individual goods without interacting with others, and thus are interdependent in respect to their flourishing as individuals. While the space for this paper does not allow for an explanation of the political ramifications of these two metaphysical principles, these two principles provide a foundation for a broader positive anti-atomist political theory that greatly improves on the current metaphysical assumptions of the atomist project.

Notes

- i. Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, (Bath: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187.
- ii. Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 81.
- iii. MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999, 1-2.
- iv. *Ibid*, 99.
- v. *Ibid*, 108.
- vi. Saussure, Ferdinand De. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. 9.
- vii. Taylor, "Irreducibly Social Goods," 134.
- viii. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 99.
- ix. *Ibid*, p. 102.
- x. *Ibid*, p. 108.
- xi. *Ibid*, p. 109.
- xii. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 107 (*italics added*).
- xiii. *Ibid*, 108.
- xiv. *Ibid*, 109.
- xv. Taylor, Charles. "The Validity of Trascendental Arguments." *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. 22.
- xvi. *Ibid*.
- xvii. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 11.
- xviii. *Ibid*, p. 12.
- xix. *Ibid*, p. 15.
- xx. Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. 225.

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