Charles Taylor
*Modern Social Imaginaries*
Mark Sargent*

Charles Taylor is our leading interrogator of modernity. In a series of important books, he has carefully teased out modernity’s origins, its character, and the moral dilemmas it presents. A critic as well as an interrogator, he uncovers the spiritual flatness, instability, and atomism at the heart of our secular age, and urges retrieval of ways of understanding the world, and the place of the individual in it, that Western culture has lost. Taylor, however, is no neotraditional romantic about the past. His quarrel with modernity is a lover’s quarrel. He finds much about it ennobling and hopeful, as well as much that is debasing. His work is a call for understanding and realizing a fuller range of human possibilities within the moral order of what he calls the modern social imaginary: our common understanding of what legitimates our social arrangements.

Taylor’s “social imaginary” is not a novel concept. It resembles Foucault’s notion of the *episteme*, although Taylor never gases on about “discourses.” What is new here is the way he draws together the strands developed in his well-known books, *Sources of Self, The Ethics of Authenticity* and *Multiculturalism and the “Politics of Recognition,”* into a kind of *summa*, a grand historical narrative of

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how our basic concepts of meaning have changed and the moral order of modernity has emerged. Taylor’s preoccupation with history is more than incidental. For him, meaning is always historically situated; he eschews the ahistoricity of analytical philosophy, and the grand philosophical questions he confronts are always presented not in the abstract but as aspects of the history of consciousness. Understanding the moral order of our social imaginary, therefore, requires an understanding of what Taylor calls “the long march” to modernity.

His definition of where that long march ended is as succinct as it is comprehensive. “Modernity” is that

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\text{[h]istorically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaningless, a sense of impending social dissolution).}
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This definition gives Taylor a starting point for explaining the emergence of the moral order that legitimizes these new practices and institutions and that makes our way of living, though haunted by a distinctive malaise, seem the only possible – or at least “civilized” – way of living.

What began to emerge in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Taylor argues, are four related principles. First, a belief that all thinking about
society should start with individuals, and that society should exist for their mutual benefit. This belief that the individual somehow precedes society rejects the premodern (and Aristotelian) notion, evident in much Catholic social teaching, that a person “can be a proper moral agent only when embedded in a larger social whole,” and contemplates that “one can be a fully competent human subject outside of society.” Second, political institutions arise only against the pre-existing backdrop of rights-bearing individuals. The goal of the political is to enable individuals to serve each other for mutual benefit in providing security and fostering exchange and prosperity. The goal of the political is thus to satisfy the needs of ordinary life. This, not traditional culture’s emphasis on our linkage to a transcendent order, is the only purpose of political society. Politics aims only to secure for individuals the “conditions of existence as free agents.” Third, political society is organized to defend individual rights. Individuals are understood primarily as autonomous bearers of rights, free to exercise their agency in shaping both their own lives and the social order. Fourth, rights, freedom, and mutual benefit are to be secured to all individuals equally.

The long march to this modern moral order begins with, as Taylor puts it, the “Great Disembedding,” a centuries-long process of disenchantment. In traditional societies, individuals were identified relationally by their place in the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchically organized structure linking all in society
with one another and ultimately with God. The physical world, the human world, and the spiritual world were all arranged in a “hierarchical complementarity” with each other.

Taylor tells the intricate story of how the modern moral order slowly emerged through the Reformation and the Enlightenment and the breakup of the traditional matrix. Hierarchical complementarity disintegrated, replaced by three new spheres, each distinct, and centered around the individual: the economy, the realm of exchange among individuals; the public sphere, the institutions and practices through which free individuals form and express their opinions about how political and economic power should be used; and the sovereign people, the new source of moral and political legitimacy and authority. For moderns, society was no longer equivalent to the polity, and the correct political institutions were no longer deducible from a God-given telos at work in human society. Indeed, the notion that society was moving through ordinary time (literally “secular” time) toward the end of days, the goal of salvation, gradually disappeared. Society was no longer going anywhere. Instead of pointing beyond itself, time flattened out, became “horizontal” in Taylor’s terms – just one thing after another.

Taylor’s ambivalence about the modern moral order is well known, and implicit in the way he describes its historical development in Modern Social Imaginaries. The book seems strangely truncated, however, because he does not
explain in detail exactly how the new order produced the characteristic malaises of modernity. Why were alienation, meaninglessness, and a sense of social dissolution triggered by, or associated with, the massive cultural shift toward individual liberty? That discussion may be omitted in this text because Taylor has written so much about those problems elsewhere. Here he is more interested in explaining how Western culture got to this point rather than dissecting the anatomy of the present melancholy. Taylor may also plan to revisit that problem in a larger work, to be titled *Living in a Secular Age*, of which this relatively short book is apparently just a part.

That larger work also may give us a clearer sense of what Taylor thinks about religion. For Taylor religion is a force that has cut in different directions. It sacralized the traditional order of things and situated history, society, and politics in the transcendent, and thus seems quintessentially premodern. Taylor argues, however, that Christianity’s radical insistence on the encounter of each individual soul with God, along with the Augustinian antithesis between the City of God and the City of Man, always stood in tension with the premodern tendency to define the person primarily within the obligations and limits of the social order. This tension, Taylor argues, eventually led to the Reformation, which he sees as one of the key forces propelling the move to a new order centering on the individual. Given
religion’s ambiguous legacy, what role would Taylor have it play in his effort to retrieve the sources of meaning and identity?

Perhaps we can answer that question by recognizing that in Taylor’s terms the Catholic sacramental imagination, filled as it is with intimations of eternity, is profoundly antimodern. In the Catholic worldview, the miraculous is always present in the quotidian, even if elusively. In this sense, the Catholic sacramental imagination has remained “enchanted,” seeing each soul embedded in the communion of saints, and flourishing not just in ordinary time, but in sacred time with all souls that have gone before. Taylor does not write as a believer in this book, but in his call for retrieval of a useable past he implicitly calls for a new social imaginary in which the individual’s horizons are not limited by the radical individualism, rational instrumentalism, and spiritual flatness of the modern, secular world. Modern Social Imaginaries leaves the reader wanting to know more about how Taylor might imagine an alternative to modernity, but perhaps it would look something like the enchanted Catholic social imaginary that has found a way to resist the radical claims of modernity while remaining part of the modern world.