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"Democracy Is Always Going to Be Hard": An Interview with Charles Taylor*

Paolo Costa

Abstract: This interview with the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor was designed and realized to celebrate his ninetieth birthday in November 2021. The interview touches on all the main themes of Taylor's oeuvre, from his view of philosophy to the inherent link between human intelligence and strong evaluations, from the Immanent Frame to postsecularity, from today's democratic crisis to the 1980s debate between liberals and communitarians, from Xi Jinping's China to the global health emergency, from spirituality to Philosophical Romanticism. It is both a hindsight analysis by a first-class thinker and a glance into the future by an incurable optimist.

Introduction

Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher from Montreal, turned ninety in November 2021. For those who have benefited from his vast and multifaceted philosophical work, Taylor is a "maestro," a teacher in the old sense of the word. This assessment can be easily vindicated by pointing out that the crucial insights conveyed by his philosophical anthropology concern human life's ethical "damned" seriousness. For Taylor, human beings are strong evaluators, that is, people who orient themselves in a space of thought and action where "things" (ends, choices, contrasts) matter in a special way. People's identity is indeed shaped by their strongly evaluative topography and they do need to know who they are if they are to function as the kind of rich social beings they are meant to be.

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Such seriousness is not just a psychological intimate quality. It is entrenched in a whole form of life, as the very idea of a private space of meaning makes no sense at this level of understanding. People are always engaged in a collective effort to interpret the dense meanings that they first encounter in common stories, practices, imaginaries, institutions, traditions (with their special sense of value and reality), which are partially opaque, fluid, contested. For us Western moderns, in particular, all of this entails that grasping modernity, or what it means to live in a secular age, is not just a theoretical or academic challenge. It is rather part and parcel of the task of living up to the call to lead a life that is as "full" as it can be, given the circumstances. Thus, to evoke *Sources of the Self*'s illustrative subtitle, we could claim that each of us is involved in the "making of the modern identity."[1]

If you are lucky enough, when you interview a first-class thinker who was a personal witness to so many turning points in the last century, you get a bit of stock taking—a hindsight examination of his life as a man of heart and mind—and a tentative glance into the foreseeable future. Both are offered here with Taylor's typical mixture of candor and intellectual humility. This open-minded stance towards life, I surmise, is what has made him a teacher, a maestro, all the way down for most of his readers.

Paolo Costa: What I would like to do in this interview is invite you to look back at your life with the benefit of hindsight: a sort of philosophical stock-taking, as it were. I begin this journey through time by asking what you think of Hegel's view of philosophy as your own time apprehended in thought. Is this how you interpret your intellectual vocation or do you see yourself closer to the Socratic ideal of an examined life?

Charles Taylor: I do not think that you can have the examined life without trying to understand your time. In order to understand what issues are troubling society, troubling politics, and also troubling you, you have to be able to compare yourself to other people with different views and understand why they have these views. Maybe they are right, maybe I am wrong: you have to satisfy yourself to some degree that, on this issue, I have got it right or else you have to change your mind. Now, all that supposes that we have some understanding of our time, and you see that this understanding very much affects the quality of your examined life.

Let us take the, at least for me, extreme case of a raving atheist such as Richard Dawkins. His particular idea of what our age is is based on the sense that religions, and the crazy people who still believe in them, are encouraging violence and so forth. Now, if you look at things that way then you look at the whole issue of what you should do, what is important, in a totally different way from the way I do. So, who has got closer to being right about what our age consists in—between people like me,

[1]Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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Dawkins, and other men and women with different views—is not a question that can be avoided.

Now, certainly Hegel had a degree of self-assurance about this and a view of the growth of reason, which is, alas, much too simple, and self-serving. In that sense, no one is going to be a Hegel today and proclaim, "This is what it is." Nobody is going to listen to that kind of self-assured tone. I myself would turn off listening immediately. But the question surely remains crucial. We are all still struggling with it.

PC: From your privileged standpoint, did you witness significant changes in people's attitude towards this goal of apprehending one's own time in thought?

CT: Yes, for sure, my lifetime has been long enough to notice changes. So, indeed, I saw a lot of changes in the intellectual atmosphere. For instance, I was brought up in the aftermath of the Second World War. It was absolutely obvious back then that we had fought a battle of the death with fascism. Maybe we were going to have another one with communism, but that was another issue. We shared a certain idea of democracy, of democracy's health, of democracy's possible sicknesses. Since then, I mean, there was a growth of what people call right-wing populism. This is a totally unforeseen challenge, or a threat to what anyway I can see as democracy. We have to understand why that happened, because otherwise we are not going to be very effective in fighting back. Unless we have very different conceptions of what is going on, there is no comparison with the 1950s, when I was a very young social democrat. We were quite clear then that we had to go farther than where the present social democrats were, but in the same direction. Today it is a very different world. And there are some people who never want to adjust to that and they want to go on saying the same things, like the conservatives in the United States who want to go on banging on the same questions and you feel a growing disconnect with the world we are living in.

PC: Given that Hegel already struggled to balance the hermeneutical and the critical elements of his thought, how do you see this issue in light of what you accomplished in your work? How much "understanding" and how much "judgment" is required of a good philosopher? I am especially interested in hearing your opinion about the role of situatedness and positionality in the public conversation today. In short, do you see yourself as a critical thinker? And, if this is the case, what kind of critical thinker?

CT: I think that there is a third dimension of these things besides understanding and judging your time. There is what you are going to do about your time. All these three questions have to be answered. And they are, of course, connected. If you misjudge your time, then you are not going to be very effective. This thing applies, I guess, to our present democratic crisis. People like Donald Trump, Victor Orbàn, etc., who are getting a lot of support, pose a challenge to our capacity to understand. My idea is that you have to come to understand why this is happening and not simply make the judgment

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that this is wrong. I do not want to deny that their answer is totally wrong, of course. But judging is not enough. If you push back the boat when it is sinking in the middle of the ocean, well, you are obviously wrong. If you are going to ever win some of those people back, which is the only way in a democracy to defeat such positions, you have to understand them. But this goes deeper than just putting them in perspective. So, let us go deeper. Because this is a very good example of what I talked about before.

There is one set of things that are obviously moving people to vote for Trump, Orbàn, etc., which is a kind of fear of change or fear of being changed. I know this dynamic too well from Quebec, because mine is a particularly small society, a French-speaking society that has been very worried about changes for at least the last century. So, if something strange comes along, like Muslims wearing hijabs, the alarm goes off immediately. That is one thing. But there is something else that really requires a deeper probe. Take the race situation in the United States, which is an excellent example. Those who responded in a creative way to that crisis are people like Martin Luther King. And what MLK is saying to the people who are going all about putting blacks in their places and so on, is not something along the line of "you're just wrong, you're a bunch of nonliberals, you're unchristian." He is actually proposing to them that they liberate themselves from something that is really terrible for them.

Let us put ourselves in the position of one of these racist white supremacists. First of all, their entire sense of self-respect is based on being higher than these other (nonwhite) people. Secondly, they have a deep feeling, even if it is not conscious, that they have done something terrible to these people and that these people must be at some level raging to revenge themselves. So, they live with a self-cramping understanding of what dignity is and with a lot of underlying fears, even if they do not admit it to themselves. If they could rise out of that, there would be an immense satisfaction. But it takes ethical growth. Such are the satisfactions of living in the truth, what you really think is deep satisfaction, not blind yourself all the time: the satisfaction of being able to actually treat these other persons not as enemies but as fellow creatures or citizens. The satisfaction involved in what you can create together, because everybody feels frustrated in societies where no one can decide anything, do anything, face the problems together. Still, in order to understand those possible satisfactions you have to have, I think, a deeper ethical understanding of what moves human beings.

Thus, if we take this as an example, we can see how tremendously complex is the task we are facing. There is a kind of understanding, which I share with many American liberal democrats. I do not want to deny that. However, they still have a standpoint from which they look down at these people like they were riffraff, good-for-nothings, dregs of society, and they assume that the problem ends there. But if you think that the problem stops there, you are going to be beaten all the time. Biden is a good example of not doing that, as against Hilary Clinton in 2016. Just mentioning "restore dignity for

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everyone, especially the poor" he came across something such as "I can understand you." Because part of what motivates those workers in the Rust Belt is that they are in a very bad economic situation. Now, the last persons who are going to help them are Trump and the Republicans, that is for sure and this is obviously the mistake they make. Anyway, Biden gave them the sense that "I see you," "I see what's troubling you." This is what is involved in understanding your time in thoughts. Something that is a lot more than Standard Politics 101, which just says that there are movements, kinds of people that are prejudiced against others, and you can predict the politics only by making polls.

PC: There is a lot of talk nowadays about the revolution of AI, the digital revolution, etc. The Israeli historian and best-selling author Yuval Noah Harari, who spoke appreciatively of your work (especially of Sources of the Self*) in a* New Yorker *interview,*[2] *for example, puts a lot of emphasis on the prediction that algorithms will outsmart humans. "We will be able," he claims, "to create an algorithm that understands me better than I understand myself."*[3] *You do not explicitly speak of "intelligence" in your writings on the topic, but you seem to give a lot of importance to the fact that we humans are creatures for whom things matter in a special way and that this is a peculiar trait of our intelligence. Do you see a connection between this insight and skepticism about the hype concerning the supposed earth-shattering impact of the new digital technologies?*

CT: Yes. My starting point is that you have to be an organic being to have feelings. The AI missionaries start at the most external, while I start from basic facts about human life. For example, people invent terms for different wines. They say: "this wine is smooth," or "it is lighter bodied," or "it is fruity." Inventing those terms, they really are consulting what it feels like to drink this glass of wine. Now, how could there be a machine tasting wines like that? Machines cannot feel. Then, you can go beyond that and handle deeper issues. "Is it a nobler mode of life to live in fear of these other people who at some level you have been fighting off or to rise to a point where you can face that and meet them, resolve things?" This is another level of feeling, which is also something that a machine has no way to simulate.

So, the only way you can make it appear entirely reducible to an algorithm is, so to speak, to change the game. Think even of something like chess, with the supercomputer Deep Blue beating Garry Kasparov, but in a way that is

[2]Ian Parker, "Yuval Noah Harari's History of Everyone, Ever," *New Yorker*, Feb. 17 and 24, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/17/yuval-noah-harari-gives-the-really-big-picture, accessed Dec. 20, 2021.

[3]Nicholas Thompson, "When Tech Knows You Better than You Know Yourself," *Wired*, April 10, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/artificial-intelligence-yuval-noah-harari-tristan-harris/, accessed Dec. 20, 2021; Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2017), chap. 9.

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not like being beaten by another expert player. Bert Dreyfus and his brother Stuart talked a lot, and convincingly, about that.[4] They interviewed chess masters and never found traces of straight calculation in their playing skills. The words that they used were: "strength over here," "weakness there," "threat there." A machine works totally differently: it counts out very quickly and often comes up with something that humans, even the best humans, cannot do that quickly.

Now, the people who invented Deep Blue were childishly reveling: "We told you so." But things are different. It does not make much sense to proclaim: "we outsmarted humans," because computers and humans are playing different games here. The real issue is rather: Does the computer work in entirely different way in order to win? Not: Can we build a computer that calculates faster than humans? These wonderful machines can go so fast —I have no qualms about the scope of this technological outbreak. But what kind of mastery is theirs? This is the crux of the matter, as far as I can see. If we want to use my philosophical jargon, computers cannot be strong evaluators. Another way to make the same point is to quote my mother and say that there is an intelligence of the head and an intelligence of the heart. If you are struggling with a relationship, it would be pretty dumb to look for the help you need to work it out in a computer, no matter if super or whatever. My mother never went to school—I mean, she was taught at home—but she got it right in this case.

Sometimes it looks like even very intelligent people lack the moral imagination required to understand, for instance, the challenges that humanity is facing with today's pandemic—even people who study early hominids, where imagination would seem inescapable in order to make sense of the circumstantial evidence we can collect from our species' past. I would say that they are using something that they do not recognize reflectively. This is a strange fact about these people who are much more competent than they appear to be when they take stock of what they found out. I am glad to hear that Harari once said that no twentieth-century philosophical book had influenced him more than *Sources of the Self*. But it may be that he simply skipped the first part—the chapters about moral identity, strong evaluation, ethical projectionism, etc. Many people do. They are attracted by the historical sections where they find direct references to Plato, Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, but ignore the framing discussion. It is hard to say how they can follow my argument through, but they do it—that is a fact.

PC: The claim that we are strong evaluators is a cornerstone of your philosophical anthropology. "Strong" suggests or implies a center of gravity, an identity that is not arbitrarily chosen. Still, you also claim that we humans are interpretation all the way down and this idea seems to be in tune with a general predilection for fluidity,

[4]Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

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indetermination, open-endedness nowadays.[5] *So, I would be curious to know where you place the balance point between these two elements—let us call them activity and passivity—in matters of personal identity?*

CT: Identity is really largely defined or, to moderate my claim, at least a dimension of it is shaped by our strong evaluations. So, if I say "my identity is Quebecois" it means that I am strongly attached to the continuing of this society because I see something very valuable in it. But I also have criticisms—attachment is not equal to identicalness. It belongs to my identity, but the relation is very complex and consists largely of important and strong evaluations about the continuation of this society interlocked with great reservations about, for instance, people's temptation to go in wrong directions. That was the point I was trying to make in the first part of *Sources of the Self*: you cannot separate identity from strong evaluations because it always consists in a number of them. The possibly conflictual part comes from the fact that the third side of a metaphorical triangle of identity is that we develop, negotiate, come to them in a process of exchange, a very unequal exchange at the beginning, when we are just small kids in front of these looming parents, whom we love and depend upon and who are smarter, more experienced, etc. than we are.

For, at the time, this is obviously how it should be. Then we evolve from the family nest and we go to school and university. In short, we enter society, which is made of many opinionated people. Now, things start to change. The whole issue, for example, about women never daring to take a certain line of action or take up a certain profession because that is not appropriate, that is not a woman's thing, you must be nicer, girlish, etc., usually leads to an inner conflict when you have to go against your parents', or doctors', or priests' will just because you do not want to be a housewife. So, we come across this triangled relationship between identity, strong evaluations, and, if you will, the dialogical spaces that you cannot escape. Some of which can also work very positively. Everybody knows some people who do not really know what they want and need these spaces of exchange to tell what they strongly value from what they weakly desire. It may be a wonderful teacher whom they met at school and encouraged them to take the right path to their full satisfaction. And then there is the negative side. The idea that my father would die or would be horrified if I did what I strongly want to do. Pain for him means pain for me as well, so I decide to bear this cross for most of my life. That is what I mean by "very complex relationship" and if you try to understand any one of these without the other dimensions, you vastly oversimplify human existence.

PC: Speaking in general, however, you don't seem to fear that the postmodern denial of strong evaluations may be the harbinger of what I sometimes call a "second axial

[5]Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?" and "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–76.

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turn" (I mean, the undoing of the first axial turn, with its discovery of "transcendence") and, yet, the metaphor of an Immanent Frame is a crucial element in your understanding of a secular age?[6] *How should we interpret, then, the idea of a "frame"?*

CT: It is very important to see the Immanent Frame as a sort of social imaginary. What I call "social imaginary" is an understanding that we have. I mean, it is called "imaginary" because it is not exclusively statable in theoretical propositions. Just think about it. We have an institutional cocktail party, and we say things like "Thank you very much, I liked your red wine," while you do not say "You are such a crock: now, explain to me why you voted for Trump!" You simply understand that this is how you should behave in such social circumstances. But this is understood as collectively understood: everybody knows that everybody knows. I do not just think: "I should behave like this because my mother told me to be polite." I think I should behave that way because we all understand that we all understand we should behave like this.

Now, what do I know I share with all the other participants in the community? The Immanent Frame is like that: we know that whomever we are talking to, unless s/he is completely crazy (I mean, there are always contrarians, like people who deny climate change, but I leave this "bubble" phenomenon aside), no matter if she is the most hard-line atheist, or the deepest believer, they all know, all accept that the earth is billions of years old, that the universe is huge and chock-full of galaxies, and that the present society was founded in 1789 or in 1776, that it is based on the notion of "We, the people," etc. That is shared by all of us. But what we do not share is the view whether this really answers our deepest questions, needs, demands ("How should I live?" "What is really important in my life?"). So what you know you share is set against the background of knowing that you do different things with this. Living in an Immanent Frame is indeed a bit like attending a cocktail party: we are all together in this, but at the same time we enter such shared social space with different attitudes and a fair amount of ease of movement.

Thus, for Dawkins or, to take an even better example of someone who feels at home in an Immanent Frame and thinks that the world is getting better, i.e., less violent, by itself as part of our evolution, for Steven Pinker, we already have all we need to know or decide what to do, what is bad, what is good, within this evolutionary, i.e., purely immanent, perspective. For me, on the contrary, the most interesting part of the discussion begins precisely there, since the crucial questions are left unanswered. So, to go back to the example of the cocktail party, what is understood as collectively understood within the Immanent Frame is that there is room also for people like me who need information of another kind to work out what is really important in

[6]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 15.

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human life, aside from the evolutionary trends, which is all there is according to Dawkins and Pinker.

PC: Is there a use for the notion of "postsecularity" in your view of the current spiritual situation? Or do you prefer "multiple secularities"?

CT: The use I could make of the idea of a "postsecularity" is the following. We have arrived at an age where, along with the shared understanding of the Immanent Frame, is the shared understanding that this does not necessarily decide very much in terms of what we should do and what we should think. In that sense, you might say that we are moving towards a postsecular condition. Still, taking that as a fact is a little bit fast, because there are people like Dawkins and Pinker who disagree with that next step and who think that everybody who does not agree with them is stupid, evil, unsophisticated, or whatever. But if we understand "postsecularity" as indicating that a lot of people who regarded the Immanent Frame as self-sufficient have now come around to recognize that this does not kill off religion and that there are quite intelligent people who still have other answers, that would be what a postsecular age is.

To tell the whole truth, I think that the situation we are living in is more confusing than that. I mean, since I have already redefined "secularity" in *A Secular Age* as the property of an age that is spiritually much more plural than was generally considered to be, I do not see the urgency to add another post-something to my conceptual repertoire. But I know what people are gesturing at when they use the word: they are getting at a notion such as "postsecularism," like Habermas does with his critical look at the standard secularization view.

PC: I would like to bring you back now to the 1980s debate between liberals and communitarians. In a time where globalization seems to be undergoing a major crisis, do you see this development as a de facto rejection of a procedural or individual-rights-centered view of politics? Is the return of national sovereignty a response to unfulfilled political needs for security, solidarity, commonality?

CT: I certainly do, but I do not think that this is enough to convince my opponents in the liberal-communitarian controversy that I was right and they were wrong. The point that I wanted to make at the time is that human beings are not primarily insulated individuals. They always have communal ties—it can be a family or it can be a smaller group than the political society—but in many cases they are embedded in a society with which they identify; it is part of their identity. Beyond that, you simply do not have a democracy. In other words, you do not have any kind of republican self-rule, if you do not have this kind of strong commitment. Just think about it: in a democracy, you have to trust that you are not the only decent person who goes to war if conscripted or pays taxes while everybody else is cheating. Or when we discuss the common good, for example during the election time, you have to trust that you are not the only one thinking in those terms while everybody else is

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discussing their personal good under that title. In a word, there must be trust in our common identity. Without that, democracy really decays: suspicion and cynicism puts an end to it.

This is the problem with free societies. If you are under the reign of Kaiser Franz Joseph, you can be taught to behave like the kaiser expects you to do, but this is not how a free society works. Free societies have a powerful need for solidarity, which we have to have and which you do find in a workable democracy. Even in the United States, which is one of the weakest democracies from this point of view in the Western constellation of democracies, when there is a disaster, let us say a natural disaster—a tornado, a huge fire—people recognize that the federal state has to jump in and help people. What they do not recognize is that the average person—if they are in a terrible situation and do not have any insurance—deserves support from the community as such, I mean as a member of this fraternal community.

Here we get to a point where one can see a kind of self-preoccupation involved in certain varieties of liberalism. Am I free? Am I allowed to be what I want to be? That goes along with a meritocratic ideology, which Michael Sandel has successfully discussed and criticized in his last book.[7] People have this idea that I did it all myself, so I deserve it, while you failed, and therefore you just do not deserve it: so tell me why should I help you? As a result, you have this immense reason why we should not be bothered helping other people which dominates the Republican Party in the United States these days. It is something extremely ugly.

Now, it is not that Rawls thought like that. On the contrary, he was a real social democrat, trying to find a reason to go beyond this meritocratic frame of mind. The crazy thing, for me at least, is that he was seriously trying to find a reason for individuals to collaborate with other individuals on the basis of their enlightened self-interests. Sandel's understanding of ethics, in contrast, goes back to Aristotle (or Hannah Arendt, for that matter) to the effect that there are certain finer or nobler conceptions of being human and one of these is that you are willing to work together with other people in a spirit of solidarity. And that is precisely what you have to build your democratic society on. Solidarity, in turn, needs a sense of the importance of common identity and not some ingenious argument, starting from everybody being an individual, that should finally lead to a very strong social democratic conclusion, but fails to convince you in the end—at least, this is how I feel about it. I cannot earn a cent more than you, unless I am sure that this is justified in the original position: how do you calculate this?

PC: There seems to be a wavering between populism and technocracy in people's stance toward politics today. As far as I can see, they are both reactive attitudes.

[7]Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

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What is lacking, I think, is faith in the potentials of common agency and hope in the possibility to change for the better. Do you see a connection between this sense of powerlessness and the growing sense that we live in a new era, the Anthropocene, and that there is nothing that can be done to unravel the chaos modern humans have brought about?

CT: Yes, I see a connection between certain kinds of technocratic stance and the lack of desire to put things to the vote. This is certainly something that has been central to our democratic breakdown, partly in the form of neoliberalism. By "neoliberalism" I mean the idea "let the market sort it out," which it clearly can't. The market, if you let it go, can actually provide higher levels of production, possibly of goods that sometimes do more harm than good, as we all know firsthand. But what it does not even try to do is to distribute them. So, it has to be controlled by some kind of democratic consensus.

The problem is that there are also good technocratic interventions, for example interventions stemming from ecological crises or challenges. Indeed, there is this tension in our society all the time, because if, for example, you have to reduce your country's dependence on oil and focus on cost-effective wind power, you need efficient technocratic interventions. In Western Canada or in Texas people react to these oil reduction plans saying, "no way, the oil is sacred," and the same thing happens with coal in the Appalachian Mountains or in parts of Germany. We have to be able to convince those people that such interventions are necessary. Now, here again, it is important to get an idea of why people feel so identified with a way of life that has clearly become indefensible.

Such is the case with the coal miners, for example. I am thinking now, for instance, of the Murcki coal mine, a large mine in Katowice, in the south of Poland. People there are totally identified with the heroism of going down into the depths and pulling the coal up. Thus, you have to be able to offer them something else, alternative employments, not just for the economic reason that they need something to earn their daily bread. It has to be something that is for them also a source of deep meaning, which should not be impossible in an age where we are going to defend our planet from the most terrible consequences. It has to be possible to paint that goal in a heroic light, but it is going to need the kind of appeal which can actually move people to, in this case, switch some crucial features of their identity definition in order to do the right thing. So, there is always going to be this mêlée between the technocratic and the democratic dimensions. In a sense, the whole neoliberal wave has been a way of escaping, denying that conflict by saying "trust us: it will go better for everybody."

PC: As far as you can see, has the pandemic simply exacerbated this clash between more technocratic or even authoritarian ways of coping with the health emergency and more collaborative modes of handling it, or do you see new options coming up?

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CT: Well, the pandemic, in a sense, grew out of previous illusions, because a lot of people thought that if we concentrate on the maximum production of goods for individual use, the rest will take care of itself. The story is well known and has been repeated ad nauseam in the last decades: cut down the money spent on health and education and in the end it will work out fine. That was brutally shown up by the pandemic. The tremendous lack of preparation of our health systems in face of the emergency was under everybody's eyes. I mean, probably the situation is much better in Europe than across the Atlantic and it was certainly better in Canada than in the United States, but it was not perfect, even though we have a kind of welfare state that helped to stem the worst virus outbreaks.

So, that illusion was blown. But then we have the other possible illusions about climate change: that it has been exaggerated, that is not that threatening, important, and so on. Here there is a real task of mobilizing. But, lucky for us, we have on our side the tremendous force of the younger generation that is really aware that something new has come about. Kids of sixteen and up are fired up about this, just horrified, uncomprehending of how the system can go on and sleepwalk to the disaster. But it is going to be a hard slope, anyhow. I suppose that democracy is always like that: Churchill warning about Nazi Germany and an impending German attack but nobody wants to listen, because of the painful memories of the previous World War ("please don't bring us back to that"). It is always going to be a challenge, I think. In this case, however, we have certain assets on our side, so we won't totally go against the grain.

PC: From a global point of view, do you see new political models emerging from different civilizations such as China or India? Daniel Bell, for example, seems to think that China's administrative meritocracy might be a serious alternative to Western agonist, multiparty democracy.[8] *Do you agree with him*?

CT: No, I don't. I have not spoken to Daniel for a while and I am very nervous about his views. Generally speaking, it did not have to happen, because around 2012, or sometime around then, the Chinese system seemed to be moving in a more open direction, but then Xi Jinping came along. Now, it is not just that China is moving in another direction, but that horrifying things are being done there, not only to the Uyghurs minority in the northwest region of Xinjiang. I do not know how it feels like to be there in China these days. It certainly is not a good place to be a Canadian. There are two Canadians in jail in China currently after a top Chinese telecoms executive, Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of the founder of Huawei, the Chinese telecom giant, was charged by the Justice Department with violating US sanctions against Iran. Meng is now in house arrest in a Vancouver mansion while the US tries to extradite her from Canada. Michael Kovrig and Michael

[8]Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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Spavor, the two Canadians I was talking about, are just being held as hostages.[9] We experienced firsthand, thus, that there is no rule of law in China. In short, I think that Daniel's whole idea has been blown out of the water because, if you have that kind of regime, you can in any moment turn from being a careful responsible steward to a corrupted traitor to your country.

However, what you do find in places like Taiwan, to take another Chinese society, and to some extent South Korea, are examples of countries that were extremely effective in face of the pandemic. Their success, I think, was based upon something like a Confucian cultural background that fuels a sense of responsibility which in some respect, I would say, the Anglo-Saxons totally falls down on. Westerners in general are not very good at that.

PC: Going back to the beginning, how tight is the connection between your work as a philosopher and your personal search for meaning, fullness, depth? If I am not mistaken, you discussed the topic only once, that is in your acceptance speech for the Kyoto Prize.[10] *I remember that, years ago, as I was translating it into Italian, I wondered whether you had ever regretted not being born a poet, a novelist, a musician or, for that matter, a monk?*

CT: Well, not really. The one thing I have to add to qualify what I have already said in the acceptance speech you mentioned is that I also have always felt, since the very beginning, a passionate need or desire to run into the world, not out of it. So, I tried to combine being the kind of philosopher that I am, always working out what is meaningful to me, that I found denied in the philosophy I was taught, for example, at Oxford, and thus constantly challenging a certain philosophical mentality—and that certainly met a personal need for self-clarification—and, on the other hand, being strongly versed in rational, practical, political matters. This has been an uneasy combination, but not in any other sense than they both are time-consuming activities and each one effort can be seen as robbing the other of time.

PC: My last question is a standard categorization request. How would you define your philosophical stance? Is it too much to call it a variant of "Philosophical Romanticism"?

CT: The word, you know, is dangerous. I have never seen a word that is more used in contradictory senses than the word "Romantic." But it certainly is true that a lot of the things that I started thinking with and moved on from have to do with the Romantic period, the German Romantic period in particular. I got into that because somebody talked me into writing a book about Hegel and, in order to do that, I looked into the background and read Herder, Hamann,

[9]The "Meng affair" reached a diplomatic solution on September 24, 2021, with the simultaneous release of Meng and Kovrig/Spavor, who returned to Canada the following day.

[10]Charles Taylor, "What Drove Me to Philosophy?," 2008, https://www.kyotoprize.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2008_C.pdf, accessed Dec. 20, 2021.

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etc. So, I found that a great deal of what people with that background were thinking about had an absolutely crucial philosophical relevance that not everyone recognized. As a result, it has been interweaving with my understanding of Herder and, at the same time, taught me about embodied agency, which connected with Merleau-Ponty. I found this link there. But, if one just said "I told you so, Taylor is a hopeless Romantic," I would be immediately impelled to respond: "I may be, but not in T.S. Eliot's crass notion of Romanticism as an unchecked expression of feeling."

Another good example of that attitude is Flaubert's depiction of Madame Bovary as a silly woman carried away by improbable Romantic longings. Like Eliot, he was clearly reacting against and making mockery of a culture that stressed feeling at the expense of facts and reason. There is, however, a view of Romanticism that is different from Flaubert's and Eliot's, which by the way is a refutation in itself. As I said above, it drew on the issues raised by Herder and his followers (poets like Hölderlin and Novalis, polymath scholars like the brothers Schlegel, etc.) which both Flaubert and Eliot were utterly unaware of. So, to sum up, the term as such can lead people astray, but there is a sense of the word in which it is true that my own take on things can be seen as an offspring of Romanticism.

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