Charles Taylor, Strong Hermeneutics and the Politics of Difference

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In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor sketches a defence of three highly ambitious claims.[1] The first and most general one is that ideals and the practices which are meant to conform to them are answerable to reason. An ideal is made answerable to reason when, under some description, it is shown to merit allegiance. A practice meets the demands of reason when it satisfies the conditions of fulfilment of such an ideal. Taylor's second claim concerns one particular ideal – authenticity. It states that authenticity as properly articulated does indeed merit allegiance, but that many of the practices which are recommended in its name fail to fulfil the conditions of realisation of the properly articulated ideal. The third claim is that subjecting authenticity and other ideals to rational reflection can help bring about change. Specifically, it is proposed that the potential of practices to conform to their properly articulated ideal can be actualised partly as a result of rational deliberation. Arguments in support of these claims find their way into another book, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, in which Taylor makes a philosophically sophisticated appeal for the political recognition of 'difference' within modern multicultural societies.[2] Both texts are fuelled by the same fundamental conviction: that any serious philosophical diagnosis of the times needs certain conceptual resources which the prevailing terms of philosophical discourse tend to occlude.

Broadly speaking, there are three degrees of scepticism to the view that ideals are answerable to reason. According to the first, practical reason is extended beyond its legitimate scope when applied to ideals. 'First degree' sceptics doubt if ideals can be subject to reason on account of their unsuitability for *universalisation*: different people can hold incompatible ideals with *equally good* reason. What are so answerable, according to this position, are the norms which regulate social interaction, irrespective of particular ideals which individuals or groups uphold. Such norms can be 'right' or 'just' but not 'good', so they need to be distinguished from the ideals which inform those conceptions of the good. Since the distinction between 'the right' and 'the good' enables the cognitive status of moral obligation to be preserved, this kind of scepticism about the accountability of ideals to reason goes by the name of 'deontology'.[3]

'Second degree' scepticism goes further than deontology, in asserting that 'rational' justifications never do more than endorse established patterns of prejudice and authority in any given tradition. In other words, second degree sceptics carry first degree scepticism about the universalisability of the good into the domain of 'morality'. These sceptics are particularly suspicious of the idea that practice is accountable to reason. On the one hand, they hold that reason just is, as a matter of historical fact, what tradition substantiates; on the other, they reject the relationship between tradition and reason presupposed in the idea that concrete practice is accountable to theoretical abstraction.

'Third degree' sceptics agree with second degree scepticism about the answerability of actual practices to a rational 'ought', but they do so not for the sake of preserving actually existing practices from the abstractions and alleged distortions of reason. On the contrary, they maintain that the institutions and culture of modernity are *already* so disfigured. The injuries inflicted by the principle of reason, these sceptics believe, include the cultural exclusion and political marginalisation of groups whose symbolic representation is associated with desire, affectivity, the body, excess, play – in short, groups whose cultural identities are associated with the 'irrational'. Consequently, third degree sceptics seek to circumvent or subvert the very 'reason' through which, they believe, power and domination is exercised. The goal of these 'postmodern' strategies is to make space in political thought for what is allegedly non-assimilable to reason: diversity, heterogeneity and difference. For postmodern, third degree sceptics, reason is, and ought to be, the slave of difference.[4]

However, postmoderns are not the only ones to object to Taylor's favoured rationalism on historical grounds. Taylor's second claim – that authenticity, the ideal of being true to one's own individual identity in one's own unique way, has validity as an ideal – is primarily opposed by conservatives who lament what they see as the recent demise of traditional 'basic values'. According to them, the supposed 'ideal' of authenticity is responsible for the emergence of the 'me generation'; it finds its apotheosis in the contemporary 'cult' of individual self-fulfilment. They regard the quest for authenticity as self-seeking with a fake moral license,

shallow and contemptible in comparison with the heroic ideal of classical civilisation.

Postmodern critics, however, attack the ideal of authenticity not as a symptom of cultural decline, but on the grounds that it is a con or a subterfuge for domination. It is a con, they allege, because it is in principle impossible to attain: the so-called 'authentic' self can never be more than an effect of the play of signifiers in which the self is 'always already' situated. The self is here regarded as inescapably encoded in a phenomenologically opaque structure of signs. Characteristically, however, the postmodernist critic of the ideal of authenticity extends this line of thought to the conclusion that the idea of an authentic self is a delusion enmeshed within the sinister purposes of mastery and exclusion. The main target here is the notion of a unitary, centred, fixed or stable identity, to which it might be thought desirable to be true. From a perspective of this kind, authenticity might appear as a pernicious 'power-effect' of practices of confessional discipline, as an expression of the subtly violent impulse towards centring and closure, or as an alibi for the suppression of the inner heterogeneity of desire.

These radically opposed objections to the claim that authenticity has validity as an ideal, like the three degrees of scepticism about the claim that ideals are accountable to reason, imply competing recommendations as to how to conduct a philosophical critique of the present. A crucial part of either package is a conception of how critical reflection relates to practice. The objections to Taylor's third claim – that rational deliberation over ideals counts for something – again come from divergent political orientations. From the New Right, a rhetoric of the end of ideology is premised upon and serves to entrench the belief that ideals have become permanently privatised and politically obsolete. Meanwhile radicals from the New Left often maintain that the domination of technology and instrumental reason is so pervasive that the language of criticism must relinquish rational form. Total critique is understood here as the default position for the critic of the totally instrumentalised, technologised, or phallogicised society. Under such conditions *rational* deliberation makes no real difference.

Strong, Weak, and Deep Hermeneutics

In advancing his claims about authenticity, Taylor draws upon and refines the insights of philosophical hermeneutics.[5] But Taylor's philosophical commitments are sometimes diametrically at odds with those which are commonly associated with the term 'hermeneutic'. Indeed, ideas taken from hermeneutics underlie some of the most deeply rooted objections to Taylor. Some qualification is required then, if the term 'hermeneutics' is to remain useful for designating Taylor's position and its relationship to its most significant rivals. In accordance with this requirement, I propose a distinction between 'weak', 'strong', and 'deep' hermeneutics.

What I am calling 'weak hermeneutics' is a non-realist philosophy which urges complete withdrawal from ontological commitment. This defining characteristic of *ontological weakness* issues from a variety of epistemological, ethico-political and metaphilosophical considerations. The epistemological case for weak hermeneutics typically runs as follows: all knowledge is interpretation; interpretations are always value-laden; values are ultimately non-cognitive; therefore truth-claims are ultimately expressions of a non-cognitive faculty or event.[6] Weak hermeneutics is thus associated with 'perspectivism' – the doctrine, espoused most influentially by Nietzsche, that knowledge is either relative to the point of view of the knower, or reducible to the pre-discursive forces and mechanisms that constitute that point of view. Accordingly, weak hermeneutics questions the distinction between 'genuine knowledge' and 'mere interpretation'. The lack of certainty, consensus, and finality implied by the term 'interpretation', are taken as ineliminable characteristics of *all* knowledge. Given this weak epistemological base, a weak ontological superstructure looks unavoidable: if all we can *know* depends on our perspective, must we not accept that reality itself depends on our interpretations?

Weak hermeneutics avows *humility* in the face of this question, partly on account of the absence of historically invariant criteria of truth. But there is a more important reason. To call something 'real', weak hermeneutics maintains, is not just to *express* one's own particular perspective, it is also to make an *honorific gesture* about it. Thus while the gesture may be cognitively empty, it nevertheless serves a function: to privilege the claimant's own perspective and to exclude others.[7] At this point, epistemological considerations blur into ethico-political ones. For the non-realist conclusion is embraced as part of a broader affirmation of the nihilist transvaluation of 'the higher'. The idea that truth, for instance, should be regarded as the highest aim of intellectual conduct – and thus as an expression of what is higher in life – is questioned on account of its *subordinative* function. If, as weak hermeneutics has it, the quest for truth subordinates difference, its transvaluation is demanded precisely in the name of such differences. And if truth is rejected as the proper goal of intellectual conduct, it is also rejected as the goal of a properly conducted philosophical criticism.

So a kindred spirit of humility informs the metaphilosophical basis of ontological weakness. Weak hermeneutics is highly critical of the founding assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition, on account of its alleged rationalistic arrogance and intolerance of 'otherness'. Weak hermeneutic philosophy redefines its task and its relationship to culture in order to avoid the tradition's discredited foundationalism. To borrow Rorty's formulation, 'weak' hermeneutic thought consists in 'philosophical reflection which does not attempt a radical criticism of contemporary culture, does not attempt to refound or remotivate it, but simply assembles reminders and suggests some interesting possibilities'.[8]

In contrast to its weak cousin, strong hermeneutics is realist in orientation. It takes its point of departure not from the epistemological fragility of foundational truth-claims, but from the conditions of possibility of actual interpretative

practices. These conditions include the historical embeddedness and linguistic mediation of the interpreting subject upon which weak hermeneutics insists, but language is recognised as able to disclose independently subsisting realities. Reality is what is disclosed by the better of competing interpretations, and the property which interpretations compete over is truth. This moves the epistemological emphasis from *foundations* to *transitions*: disclosure, unlike correspondence, can only ever occur in relationship to a concealer and something concealed, hence truth becomes intelligible in terms of a *movement* from one interpretation to another.

While the liberation of ontology from the fetters of foundationalist epistemology is of great consequence for the philosophy of nature, it is most radical in its implications for the status of the human sciences.[9] This is because the language which features in the best accounts of human affairs is typically charged with significance; a vocabulary of significance is required as a condition of interpretative competence in this domain. But we have just seen that, according to strong hermeneutics, the competent, articulate interpreter honours the ontological commitments entailed by the best available account *over and above* any more general epistemological or metaphysical considerations.[10] Since in practical matters the best accounts are articulated in concepts invested with significance, and the investment of significance imparts evaluative force, the ontology incumbent upon the interpreter in this domain will also be evaluatively laden – it will be, that is to say, a *moral ontology*. Conversely, if truth is understood as a matter of disclosure between contrasting interpretations, and the favoured interpretation is articulated in a vocabulary of evaluative significance, then truth will also be describable in evaluatively significant terms. For strong hermeneutics, such moral realism is unavoidable.

Supported by such considerations, strong hermeneutics proposes an alternative philosophical agenda to weak hermeneutics, and adopts a quite different orientation by way of metaphilosophical critique. The agenda for strong hermeneutics is set by the concerns of a 'philosophical anthropology'.[11] These gravitate around the most suitable means for comprehending the nature of beings whose own being is a matter of self-interpretation. Strong hermeneutics seeks to clarify and draw out the implications of the insight that human beings are inescapably beings for whom things matter. It inquires into the sources of significance which shape the identity of such beings, the conditions under which such sources are opened up or closed off, and most concretely, it explores the structural conditions of satisfaction of presumably core human needs. And it is the modern philosophical tradition's perceived refusal to address such questions – indeed, its record of preventing the very articulation of them – that provokes strong hermeneutics' metaphilosophical critique.[12] Strong hermeneutics sets itself at a distance from the modern philosophical tradition on account of the distorted depiction of self-interpreting animals it finds there. But it also seeks to account for this inarticulacy over discriminations of significance and worth – what

Taylor calls 'strong evaluation' – precisely in terms of the tacitly accepted evaluations which motivate that tradition. In direct contrast to weak hermeneutics, the task of strong hermeneutics is precisely to *remotivate* the culture of modernity by recovering contact with those goods which, partly as a result of philosophical obfuscation, have become lost to it. The object of strong hermeneutics, to use Taylor's formulation, is one of 'retrieval…to uncover buried goods by way of rearticulation – and thereby to make these sources again empower'.[13]

It is in their common insistence on the priority and inescapability of the question of being, on the ontological irreducibility of background horizons of significance, and on the truth-disclosive, self-transformative function of the fusion of such horizons, that Heidegger, Gadamer and Taylor share allegiance to strong hermeneutics. As is well known, the idea of a 'depth hermeneutics' was championed by Habermas in response to the hermeneutics of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.[14] According to Habermas, Gadamer's hermeneutics was beset by two fundamental weaknesses: linguistic idealism and a failure to render intelligible the possibility and resolution of 'systematically distorted communication'. In fact, the thrust of *both* Habermas's charges is directed against idealism. In so far as hermeneutics lays claim to universality, it is easy to see why the spectre of idealism should loom. Proposed as the means by which the basic structures of social reality are disclosed, hermeneutic reflection risks abstracting linguistically constituted traditions from the systems of organised force which provide their material context. The most extreme manifestation of this idealist tendency is the assimilation of the mechanisms of power to a linguistic hermeneutic horizon. But idealist assumptions may also be operative in Gadamer's refusal to pre-empt corruption of the medium of hermeneutic reflection by structures of coercion. For so long as reflection is bound by the traditions and pre-judgements of the lived hermeneutic situation, as Habermas stressed, it remains hostage to the structures of domination and relations of power which are legitimated through these traditions. For Habermas, Gadamer's hermeneutics is idealist to the extent that it does nothing to accommodate this possibility, even if it is innocent of the more excessive idealism of *conflating* horizons of self-understanding with the social totality.

While the problems of idealism associated with tradition-bound understanding are quite straightforwardly identifiable, finding a way of transcending the given horizon of self-interpretation is not so easy. Habermas proposes one such way in his depth hermeneutical reading of Freud.[15] According to this reading, the theory and practice of psychoanalysis are joined in the 'scenic understanding' whereby the patient emancipates herself from the misery-inducing effects of systematically distorted communication. The scenic understanding aimed at in the dialogue between analyst and patient, Habermas claimed, is a hermeneutic act in that it retrieves the meaning of an initially incomprehensible text: the symptoms of the patient. It does this by appeal to *theoretical* assumptions about psycho-sexual development. An 'original' traumatic scene in the early stages of the

patient's linguistically mediated self-formative process is reconstructed around the axis of the general developmental theory. A correct understanding of the patient's behaviour is thus conditioned by a knowledge of the source of the systematic discrepancy between latent and manifest mental content. The crucial point for Habermas was that such knowledge is *discontinuous* with the language of everyday horizons of understanding. For in the former case, explanation and understanding are joined in a theoretical, methodologically non-naive vocabulary. For Habermas, psychoanalytical self-reflection acquires its explanatory power in virtue of *combining* hermeneutical interpretation of apparently incomprehensible behaviour with empirical scientific insight into the causal origin of that incomprehensibility.

As several critics have observed, this condition is extremely demanding if not incoherent.[16] Not least onerous is the requirement that a symbol of need-interpretation 'split-off' from consciousness in early infancy can be *determined*, with practical efficacy, through autobiographical reflection. Worse, the verification procedures for such an identification verge on incoherence once it is accepted that the criteria of 'success' are *internal* to the vocabulary of reflection.[17] But, however difficult, something like the condition specified by Habermas must be met, if hermeneutic idealism is to be avoided. Interpretations, at least of this kind, have a 'material' or 'empirical' base. And this is one of three poles which set the parameters for Habermas's notion of deep hermeneutics. First, by insisting upon the interpretation-dependence of the human subject, it shows the unsuitability of the human being as an object of the 'technical' cognitive interest. Second, it must do this without collapsing into the doctrine that there are *only* interpretations – that is, it keeps its distance from weak hermeneutics. It achieves this by opening up a space for the immanent critique of systematically distorted self-interpretations, by way of the supposition of a cognitive interest in 'emancipation' from sources of misery operating 'behind the back' of hermeneutic reflection.

There are thus key differences between Habermas's deep hermeneutics and the strong hermeneutics of Gadamer. Deep hermeneutics seeks to overcome what Habermas perceived as the deficiency of given horizons of self-interpretation for both explanatory and critical purposes. In the former case, supra-linguistic causes of disturbance in self-formative processes remain hidden. In the latter, criticism is vulnerable to the ideological *effect* of such disturbance. On account of these differences, a deep hermeneutics of 'suspicion' can be contrasted to a strong hermeneutics of 'retrieval'.[18] Most notably, Habermas's suspicion is provoked by the *lack* of distance between critic and tradition required for the kind of hermeneutics of retrieval urged by Gadamer. This means, for Habermas, that Gadamer's hermeneutics has a *non-contingent* conservative philosophical orientation. But is the same true of Taylor's version of strong hermeneutics?

If strong, weak, and deep hermeneutics are as distinct in their philosophical commitments as I have suggested, one might wonder what their common 'hermeneutic' theme is. The answer is opposition to 'scientism'. The scientism to which weak hermeneutics reacts is the urge to commensurate, to reduce rationality to rule, to reach closure as the end of inquiry. The scientism attacked by strong hermeneutics is an anthropology of disengagement, according to which human reality is *finessed* of substantive moral content. Deep hermeneutics reacts to the scientism of 'technocracy': the ideologically entrenched view that the only rational cognitive interest is in prediction and control. All three forms are vehemently critical of foundationalism and the possibility of humanly unmediated understanding. And each proffers a powerful indictment of the paradigm of the subject-centred philosophy associated with the Descartes–Kant canon. Yet each is very different. The *mere negation* of scientism, foundationalism, or instrumental reason, *fails to demarcate a distinctive philosophical position*. Let us see how differences between these various sources of negation manifest themselves in the dispute over Taylor's claims about authenticity.

Subjectivity: Desire or Aspiration?

I have designated Taylor's philosophical programme 'strong hermeneutics' in order to distinguish his position from the weak conception of hermeneutics – but the term also serves as a reminder of the central place the notion of 'strong evaluation' has in Taylor's thought. Since the meaning of 'ideal', in Taylor's usage, is bound up with this notion of strong evaluation, more needs to be said about it in consideration of the claim that authenticity has validity as an ideal, and that ideals are accountable to reason.[19]

In many circumstances, objects are evaluated and choices are made on the basis of what one happens to desire. In a cafe, about to choose breakfast, I weigh up the bacon roll and the muesli, and evaluate in accord with my matter of fact preference. At stake in a weak evaluation is the satisfaction of actual desire; satisfaction of contingent preference (or its likelihood) is the measure of evaluation. In other circumstances, however, the process of evaluation is not exhausted by this kind of measuring. As opposed to a weak evaluation, strong evaluation employs qualitative distinctions concerning the worth of alternative desires, and indeed of alternative courses of action and ways of living. The measure of evaluation in such cases is not mere preference, but an *independent* standard of worth, against which the value of *de facto* desire satisfaction may be questioned. In the cafe, for instance, you may really fancy the bacon roll, but you may not choose it because you acknowledge a standard which holds independent of your fancies – a conception of the proper relation between humans and animals which forbids eating the meat. In this case, the process of evaluation involves the adoption of a stance, to which your brute desires and appetites are accidental.

One evaluates strongly, then, in so far as one evaluates by appeal to a standard which is not contingent upon one's actual desires. But there is a further decisive element to Taylor's view that strong evaluations have the kind of

intelligibility that is suitable to aspirations rather than desires. This is the conceptual linkage between the stand which one adopts as a strong evaluator and one's 'identity'. The person who craves for the bacon roll but also acknowledges the force of the strong evaluation, for instance, refuses the meat because she would think of herself as a worse kind of person for choosing it. The strong evaluation tells us something about what matters to the person, quite independent of actual appetites.

It is this sense of 'identity' and 'self' which is conceptually tied to strong evaluations. 'We are selves', Taylor writes, 'only in that certain issues matter for us'.[20] An identity in this sense, it should be stressed, refers neither to a uniquely individuating set of physical or mental properties, nor to that looser set of habitual behavioural traits we call 'character'.[21] Rather it refers to the background distinctions of worth which enable a person to respond to presumably unavoidable kinds of question; such as what makes a life fulfilling rather than empty, what courses of action are right and what wrong, what species of motivation merit admiration and what contempt. Conversely, Taylor's concept of identity refers to what is absent for the person who, in the throws of an identity crisis, finds himself completely without orientation before such questions. Such a person lacks the kind of thing which, for instance, our vegetarian possesses: a space in a background moral horizon contoured by strong evaluations, an identity shaped by an ideal.

We should now be in a position to formulate more precisely the stakes of the controversy over Taylor's claim that authenticity is one such ideal. Recall that the first of the two opposing positions to Taylor's claim maintained that the modern 'culture of authenticity', in justifying individualistic modes of self-fulfilment, testifies to the victory of egoism, hedonism and self-indulgence, with the corresponding defeat of virtue, 'the higher', and genuine moral life. It represents, in other words, the elimination of horizons of strong evaluation. But as Taylor insists, this view ignores the crucial point that individuals feel called to a life which is defined for themselves; that is, they are *pulled* by a conception of a worthwhile human life which takes its hold independently of what, merely as a matter of fact, they happen to desire. The background idea is that a life spent in conformity to other people's conception of a fully human life is in a deep sense a wasted life. Put differently, a qualitative contrast can be drawn between the life of self-discovery through self-creation and the life of conformity to convention, in the sense that the former is a more desirable life, one that is more worth living. For this reason, it is a mistake to deny the validity of authenticity as an ideal by reducing it to an amoral egoism.[22]

But while authenticity cannot be reduced to self-interest, it can degenerate into it. To show how, according to Taylor, is to demonstrate one sense in which ideals are accountable to reason. But before moving onto that general claim, let us return to the second objection noted earlier to the claim that authenticity has validity as an ideal. This took issue with the presumed innocence of the centring of the self – of a self to be true to – which the ideal of authenticity encourages. The objection can now be expressed as the view that strong evaluations require a *double-decoding*; first, as the epiphenomenon of a symbolic structure which imposes hierarchical, binary contrasts; and second, as a control on the chaotic heterogeneity and spontaneity of bodily desire which threatens to disrupt such distinctions and the 'metaphysical comfort' they provide.

Taylor does not give an explicit response to the first decoding, but one can be reconstructed from the general position of strong hermeneutics.[23] It focuses on the relationship between symbolic structure and event. According to the criticism, the strong evaluator is inescapably caught up in an always-already determining structure of signs. But from the point of view of strong hermeneutics, any living language (broadly conceived) requires a more or less fixed background structure and *simultaneously* particular events of ongoing creative application and renewal. That is, any linguistic structure relies, in its capacity as a repository of meaning, on individual acts of linguistic creation on the part of particular subjects, just as the individual subject relies, in his or her capacity to purvey meaning through particular linguistic acts, on the background structure. The intelligibility of both moments is interdependent; it is the *same* intelligibility. This is another way of putting the famous 'hermeneutic circle' of the whole and part. To prioritise either, or to regard either as independent of the other, is to lose the intelligibility of both. But this is just the move which is made in the subsumption of the subject aspiring to authentic self-expression under structural symbolic determinants.

What about the second 'decoding'? The response of strong hermeneutics here is to point to the *affirmation* which is implicit in the anti-strong evaluation posture.
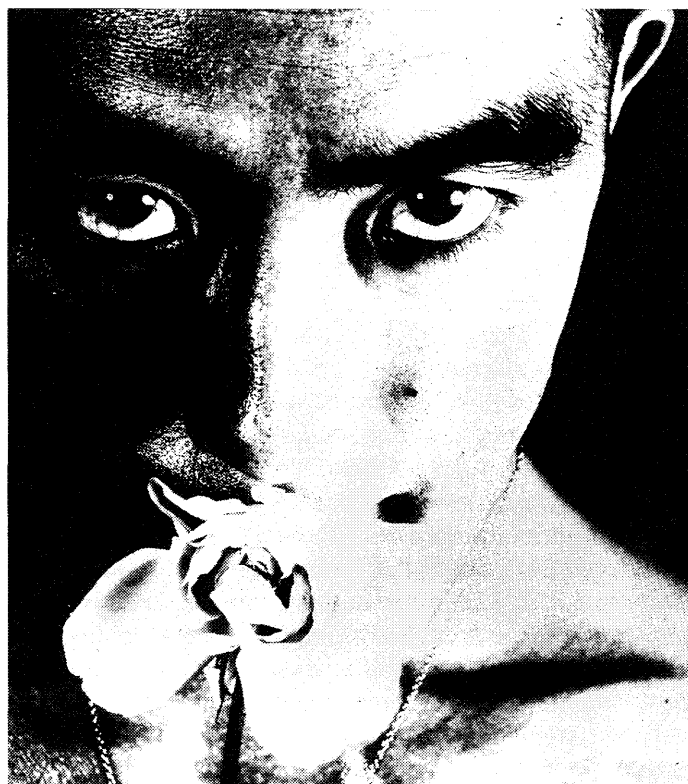
Desire, in the sense in which it is claimed to be disruptive of the strongly evaluated contrasts, is not something which is a simple given. Rather, it finds expression in the body *as interpreted* in a certain way. And only under some interpretations rather than others does it carry the disruptive, subversive significance the 'decoding' attaches to it. That is to say, the decoding has force only on the presupposition of a prior hermeneutic act. What is doing the decoding is a *characterization* of desire. But this is just what strong evaluations do; they articulate desirability-characterizations amongst which are qualitative contrasts of the content of experience. It is therefore incoherent to assume the possibility of a neutral 'decoding' of them in the manner proposed.

Taylor's claim is not only that the decoding of strong evaluations and their qualitative contrasts presupposes allegiance to a strong evaluation. It is that there is an *irrational*, in the sense of inarticulate, allegiance to authenticity at work here. For Taylor, the putative collapse of qualitative distinctions (good/bad and the like) occurs as a result of the implosive, self-undermining logic of the subjectivist interpretation of the ideal of authenticity. According to this interpretation certain aspects of the ideal – self-choice, difference, and non-conformity – are valued exclusively and as such, without consideration of the background conditions of their possibility and worth which make for *rational* interpretations. Strong hermeneutics must therefore make perspicuous the conditions under which a properly articulated ideal of authenticity may become a *political* reality.

The Aporias of Difference Politics

To accept the validity of the ideal of authenticity is to acknowledge that for each individual human being, there is a potential way of being human which is unique to them. To aspire towards authenticity is to be in pursuit of this way. Commitment to this ideal informs the aspirations of modern emancipatory movements of all complexions. A particularly influential interpretation of its political significance, however, has been the liberal conception of a private sphere within which individuals can pursue self-creation free of external interference from the state. According to this interpretation, commitment to the ideal entails a certain neutrality on the part of the state with regard to the manifold conceptions of the good life to issue from individual projects of self-creation. The character of the just state can then be discerned in terms of its impartiality towards these different conceptions of what constitutes the most worthwhile, fully human life. Here we are reminded of 'first degree scepticism': where there is radical difference at the level of substantive conceptions of the good, private freedom and public reason are reconcilable only at the formal level of impartial will-formation.

While criticism of this model of liberal politics is nothing new, there has recently emerged a novel accentuation of its failure to conceptualize adequately the phenomenon of difference.[24] A new 'politics of difference' is being demanded on the following counts. The first arises from recent changes in the patterns of political conflict and controversy. The self-descriptions of many engaged in political struggle, it seems, no longer feature universal-type categories of the old-style bourgeois and workers' emancipatory movements. As the classical conceptions of the universal citizen and the universal class acquire an increasingly rarefied, motivationally weak character, the focus of political controversy shifts from what makes people the same to what makes them different. But since it is the demands of politically marginalized groups, rather than individuals, which are at issue here, the individualist construction of liberal political theory seems an inappropriate basis for comprehending the issue.[25] Secondly, the standard liberal model is regarded as difference-blind in its presumption of the possibility and desirability of impartiality. Not only is the goal of impartiality inconsistent with ineliminable culturally embodied differences, this objection goes, but it serves the ideological function of disadvantaging differences associated with partiality and the particular. But it is the third count which gives the distinct accent to recent calls for a politics of difference. This is that the liberal model is burdened with the legacy of a philosophical tradition which, in its deep structure, is hostile to difference. As a result, a critique of reason has been deemed an appropriate point of departure for a new and radical difference politics. This position corresponds to what I earlier designated 'third degree' scepticism. It is understandable, therefore, that those attracted to it should turn to philosophical resources akin to weak hermeneutics for the purpose of theorising a radical politics of difference.

The appeal of weak hermeneutics in this respect seems obvious. Its withdrawal of ontological commitment, its humility before and affirmation of difference, its anti-universalist posture, seem at first sight to protect it from philosophically rationalised arrogance and ethnocentrism. Its radical scepticism towards the claims of reason seems the perfect antidote to the 'violent hierarchies' imposed by the demand for the legitimation of difference as such. But from the point of view of strong hermeneutics, it is a poisoned chalice.

Taylor's argument can be reconstructed around the claim that the categories of weak hermeneutics self-destruct as soon as they are applied to the issue of *recognition*.[26] If this claim is correct, the implications for difference politics articulated through the resources of weak hermeneutics are devastating, since the whole point of that politics is to address the harm inflicted by the failure to recognise difference. So a useful way of posing the philosophical issue at stake here is to ask: *under what conditions is the failure of recognition possible?* The first condition is that the difference must be significant. As Taylor reminds us, there is an infinite number of differences between individuals and groups (size, shape, fashion preference, number of hairs on the head), and an infinite number of wholly uninteresting and trivial ones. It is clearly not differences of this kind which generate the conditions of the failure of recognition in the required sense. The applicability of the distinction between significant and trivial difference is therefore a condition of the possibility of failed recognition. But this

distinction, in accordance with the logic of strong evaluation, cannot be conjured at will; horizons of significance require some *independence* from the subject. But this independence is just what is denied by weak hermeneutics; it reduces interpretation (and therewith strong evaluation) to subjective desire or will to power. In denying a condition of the intelligibility of significance, weak hermeneutics cannot make sense of significant difference. And if it cannot make sense of significant difference, nor can it make sense of the failure to recognise difference.

But if it cannot do this, then it loses its point as a philosophical orientation for a politics of difference. Taylor offers another argument in support of this conclusion. The collapse of the distinction between valid and invalid judgements of cultural value makes the support and defence of those with different cultural values a simple matter of taking sides. But this in turn undermines the significance of that *particular* difference. Again, this makes the weak hermeneutic view inconsistent with the conditions of failure to recognise the worth of particular cultural identities. But Taylor's criticism is not just directed at logical blunders. To collapse the distinction between cultural values which deserve recognition and those which do not is to be guilty of a homogenisation as grotesque as any perpetrated by Enlightenment philosophers of neutrality. Even worse, as Taylor notes, the delivery of a favourable judgement on demand, rather than signalling respect and recognition, betrays a certain condescension, not least because it is to presume that the bestower of such favours is *already* in possession of the means to interpret and understand, whatever the content of the difference. This last point is typical of the pattern of reasoning Taylor deploys against the varieties of ethnocentrism.[27] In several different contexts, Taylor exposes ethnocentrism at work in the presumption that the interpreter knows *in advance* what the outcome of the interpretation is going to be. One can only make this presumption under the anticipation that there is nothing really to learn from the encounter with the other; it is assumed by the interpreter that his own way of understanding will not be seriously challenged. For this reason if no other, weak hermeneutics is not really hermeneutics at all. The outcome of a successful hermeneutic encounter is self-transformation as a result of self-criticism, as a result of listening to the self-understanding of others.

Rightly, Taylor's strong hermeneutics constructs recognition as a dialectical process which has both content and an ineliminable moment of reason. This moment is not, however, construed as impartiality. Here Taylor agrees with the view that the classical liberal model is indeed difference-blind. To show why, Taylor distinguishes two kinds of liberal politics, both based on a principle of equal recognition. The first – what he calls the politics of equal dignity – is grounded in the principle that there is a universal human potential in virtue of which all humans are equally worthy of respect. This potential is the same in everyone and respect of it requires that all be treated in a benign difference-blind fashion. For the second – which he calls the politics of difference – the principle of equal recognition extends to the

identities which are particular to each; equal recognition is required here for what makes each different rather than the same. Against the background of recent changes in patterns of political conflict, characterised by a growing demand for the political recognition of cultural differences, Taylor maintains that the politics of equal dignity is indeed malignantly difference-blind. It is inhospitable to difference, Taylor proposes, on account of the failure of rights-based liberalism of equal dignity to accommodate the aspiration to *survival* of distinct cultural forms. Survival, Taylor continues, is a collective goal which requires context-sensitive applications of principle, whereas the liberal model insists on uniform application of the rules defining rights and is suspicious of collective goals.

It is doubtful, however, whether this idea of survival is complex enough to do the work required of it as the buffer to difference-blind liberalism. As Habermas has observed, the attempt to enshrine constitutionally the survival of a particular culture risks – and in some cases, guarantees – a reversal of the burden of prejudice.[28] If so, Taylor's move merely postpones the problem of recognition. Why, in any case, should survival have to be given constitutional status when a cultural identity is only *living* when it informs and is reproduced by the communicative processes of everyday life? Even if these questions were to be answered, Taylor's theoretical manoeuvre would remain of limited application to the multiplicity of 'struggles for recognition'. Taylor's focus on the constitutionally inscribed survival of a cultural identity makes little impact on feminist articulations of the 'struggle for recognition', for instance.[29] Most feminisms share with the depth hermeneutics of suspicion an anxiety about the incipient conservatism of the strong hermeneutics of retrieval. At the same time, if the argument of the previous sections is sound, there is no way back to the *weak* hermeneutic critique of tradition as such.[30]

Ideals, Idealism and Ideology

By way of a conclusion, I shall offer some thoughts on the direction Taylor's politics would take if it were to migrate towards the pole of deep hermeneutics. Such a migration is necessary because there are problems with the politics of Taylor's hermeneutics which issue from weaknesses in its conception of social explanation and its construction of critical distance. Habermas's critique of Gadamer, it was noted, sprang from various sources of dissatisfaction with hermeneutical idealism. Hermeneutical idealism attributes an exaggerated explanatory weight to self-interpretations in processes of self-formation and social evolution. This explanatory deficit, Habermas says, could be made good by means of a scientific analysis of culturally invariant social mechanisms. The decisive mechanisms for Habermas are social and system integration, but other functions could be prioritised by the theory, like the production of the material means of subsistence or biological reproduction. The point of such 'tiered' analyses is to allow insight into those forces of social change which operate behind the backs of self-interpreters. This criticism, put to Gadamer by Habermas, also has purchase on Taylor's hermeneutics – though it need

not be made from the vantage point of systems theory. In Taylor's hands, strong hermeneutics deploys genealogical tools to clarify the sources of significance constituting the modern identity; it constructs a narrative about how certain self-interpretations came to take hold. To be sure, Taylor emphatically distances himself from the claim that such an account is *sufficient* for explanatory purposes. He acknowledges that any adequate causal explanation would have to take account of the 'brutally imposed' material, economic, social and psychological forces which shaped the conditions for cultural allegiances.[31] But the implications of this acknowledgement are not taken up with any seriousness. They should be, because if theories were available which showed a systematic, non-contingent relationship between the realm of (productive/reproductive) necessity and the space for expressing, articulating and transmitting need-interpretations and conceptions of the good life, then according to just the 'best account' principle of strong hermeneutics, Taylor's account would stand at a distinct disadvantage so far as explanatory power goes. We would rightly call that failing hermeneutic idealism.

We might also rightly call it ideological, if by screening off causally significant power-relations, the hermeneutics served to perpetuate the very same relationships by way of a retrieval of a supervening ideal. The role which Taylor accords to 'everyday life' – the life of production and the family – perhaps best illustrates this danger.[32] Within Taylor's genealogy, family life is treated primarily as the object of an affirmation: in the course of modernity's unfolding it becomes strongly evaluated for its own sake and not merely as a means or background to some higher end. Within the parameters set by Taylor, it is a legitimate goal of strong hermeneutic reflection to retrieve the empowering moral source of this ideal. But a deep hermeneutic of suspicion will approach the ideals of family life from a very different perspective. The agenda there would be set not so much by a genealogical conflict between rival conceptions of the good, as by the social space for rational 'hermeneutic deliberation about them.[33] Ordinary life would be interpreted as a realm within which rational hermeneutic deliberation is subject to the distortions of extra-linguistic pressures which inflect the linguistic resources available to hermeneutic reflection. In this way, the empirically guided theoretical task of disclosing the brutally imposed conditions of cultural allegiance to this ideal would reflect back on the conditions of acceptability of the strong hermeneutic philosophical anthropology. Such reflexivity makes for a more adequate construction of critical distance.

There is also a more straightforward meaning to ideology which bears on the politics of Taylor's hermeneutics. For despite his claim that hermeneutic reflection can bring about change by way of recovering contact with motivationally potent moral sources, Taylor is resigned to the *givenness* of social structures which obstruct the instantiation of the corresponding ideals. This happens when, at the close of *The Ethics of Authenticity,* he announces that, concerning the market and the bureaucratic state, 'we have to live with them forever'.[34] This view is objectionable on a host of grounds internal to strong hermeneutics – the internal relation between action and self-interpretation, the openness and mutability of horizons of self-interpretation, the narrative structure of historical explanation – which forbid the naturalisation of social forms. And in its *irrationality*, it serves to stoke deep hermeneutic suspicion of the precedence given by strong hermeneutics to the retrieval of moral sources over the possibility of overcoming the mechanisms which prevent the instantiation of ideals – especially the ideal of authenticity.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, London, Harvard University Press, 1992. The text is based on a series of radio lectures broadcast in Canada and previously published in Canada under the title *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991).

2. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, with commentary by Amy Gutmann, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.

3. See Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1989. But in his more recent work, specifically *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993) Habermas does indeed affirm the accountability of ideals to rational reflection.

4. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984.

5. For a summary statement of Taylor's avowed relationship to hermeneutics, see 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 15-57.

6. I consider the following a fine example of this kind of reasoning: 'everything we encounter in our experience is no more and no less than an *interpretation* – things in the world are always interpreted into the terms of our own subjective values, and thus *the only world that can ever be known is a world of difference* (that is, a world of interpretations)'. This passage is taken from Jon R. Snyder's introduction to Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (London, Polity Press, 1988), p. xiii, in which the author sympathetically summarises the idea of 'weak thought' advocated by Vattimo (especially pp. xxii. f). 'Weak hermeneutics' thus seems to me an appropriate term for a philosophy which articulates the relationship between interpretation, subjective value, and difference in this way.

7. With specific respect to the form of its *meta-ethic*, weak hermeneutics thus coincides with logical positivism. Thoroughgoing Nietzscheans might find something 'morally humiliating' in this shared genealogy.

8. R. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 6.

9. This view is shared, though taken in a different, non-hermeneutic direction, by Roy Bhaskar. See, for example, his *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989.

10. Considerations of a kind, for instance, which constitute 'the natural attitude' of classical phenomenology. Taylor calls this the 'Best Account' principle. It is elaborated in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 69 f.

11. See the 'Introduction' to Taylor's *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985. The term has provoked anxiety because of its association with the 'metaphysical biology' of Aristotelianism. This anxiety can be quelled in two ways: first, by a recognition of the validity of the ideal of authenticity; second, by support from strong empirical theories of self-formative processes. Because it has these resources, Axel Honneth can describe his own project of Critical Theory as

philosophical anthropology, without embarrassment (*Radical Philosophy* 65, Autumn 1993, pp. 35f).

12. This metaphilosophical stance is outlined in Taylor's 'Overcoming Epistemology', in K. Baynes *et al.* (eds.) *After Philosophy*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1987, pp. 464-88.

13. *Sources of the Self*, p. 520.

14. Habermas's 'depth hermeneutics' is elaborated in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (London, Heinemann, 1972) and 'The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality', in J.Bleicher (ed.) *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, London, Routledge, 1981.

15. Of course Habermas was later to favour a very different kind of construction: a theory of communicative competence as reconstructive science. Nevertheless, Habermas has continued to defend the appropriateness of depth hermeneutic self-critique within a more narrowly circumscribed domain.

16. Pertinent criticisms of this kind, but from very different perspectives, are to be found in Russell Keat, *The Politics of Social Theory*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981; and J. Bernstein, 'Self-Knowledge as Praxis' in Christopher Nash (ed.) *Narrative in Culture*, London, Routledge, 1991.

17. This point is made effectively by Bernstein. The view he urges as a consequence of it, however, seems to leave self-interpretations hanging in the air, and as such is vulnerable to the same charge of idealism.

18. Paul Ricoeur identifies this contrast in *Freud and Philosophy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, p. 26. He assesses the Gadamer/Habermas debate, and develops his own notion of critical 'distanciation', in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

19. Taylor's discussion of the concept of strong evaluation is most focused in the papers 'What is Human Agency?' and 'Self-interpreting Animals', both in *Human Agency and Language*. That it is the key conceptual resource of Taylor's hermeneutics is suggested by the way it features in Taylor's programmatic remarks in his 'Introduction' to that volume, and in *Sources of the Self*, p. 4.

20. *Sources of the Self*, p. 34.

21. For this reason, the reservations expressed by Jonathan Rée about the philosophical cogency of the concept of identity do not have application to Taylor's notion ('Internationality', *Radical Philosophy* 60, Spring 1992, especially pp. 8f). Rée's justified misgivings stem from Locke's introduction of the problem of 'personal identity' into philosophical discourse: 'by virtue of what *fact* am I now the same person as I was in the past?' But the meaning of 'fact' here is tied to the empiricist notion of qualitatively neutral sensory data. From the standpoint of strong hermeneutics, Locke's is a classic case of reified philosophical anthropology posing as epistemology (See *Sources of the Self*,

pp. 160-176).

22. This conclusion is crucial for the general programme of strong hermeneutics. In its insistence on the immersion of the individual within historically pre-given backgrounds of significance, strong hermeneutics has typically been construed as an anti-individualist, conservative philosophy. While the philosophical resources of strong hermeneutics may have been applied for the purpose of prioritising tradition over the individual, this can now be seen as the result of an arbitrary dismissal of the ideal of individuality which informs the culture of modernity. The incipient conservatism of Taylor's hermeneutics, I argue later, comes from elsewhere.

23. One place in which Taylor makes an implicit response is his contribution to David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur*, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 176-77.

24. The best presentation of this case is Iris Marian Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990. For an introductory summary, see Diana Coole, *Women in Political Theory*, 2nd edition, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. Another useful overview is Anne Phillips and Michele Barrett (eds), *Destabilising Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992. For sympathetic scepticism (not dissimilar in spirit to my own), see Christine Synpnowich, 'Some Disquiet about "Difference"', *Praxis International*, 13:2, July 1993.

25. Habermas explores this point in 'Struggles for Recognition in Constitutional States', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1:2, August 1993, pp. 128-155.

26. So I read Taylor's *Multiculturalism and the 'Politics of Recognition'*.

27. See, for example, the essays 'Rationality' and 'Understanding and Ethnocentrism', both in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*.

28. Habermas, 'Struggles for Recognition in Constitutional States', p. 140.

29. This point is made briefly by Amy Gutmann in her commentary on Taylor's text. Various phenomena of 'struggles for recognition' and their corresponding modes of analysis are distinguished by Habermas in 'Struggles for Recognition in Constitutional States,' pp. 134-7.

30. For responses to the temptation of weak hermeneutics in contemporary feminism, see note 24.

31. *Sources of the Self*, p. 207.

32. Taylor's extended discussion of this idea is in *Sources of the Self*, pp. 211-304.

33. A particularly powerful case for pressing this agenda is put by Nancy Fraser in *Unruly Practices*, Cambridge, Polity, 1989.

34. *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 111.