Book Reviews

Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. Pp. 142. $17.95 ISBN 0-674-26863-6. (Originally published in Canada in 1991 under the title *The Malaise of Modernity*.)

Reviewed by Walter Gulick

Taylor addresses three characteristics of modernism which have often been seen as contributing to the decline of Western civilization: individualism, instrumental reason, and the replacement of political engagement with self-absorbed pursuits. His overall strategy is to make perceptive comments about the positive moral energy which has led to the rise of these characteristics of modernism while he simultaneously attempts to separate out their debilitating features. This work of retrieval is, on the whole, successful.

The Ethics of Authenticity is a relatively brief, accessible book based on a series of radio programs Taylor did for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In this respect, it contrasts with such formidable, although influential, works as *Hegel* and *Sources of the Self* that Taylor wrote earlier. Taylor has read Polanyi and cites him occasionally in his writings. Indeed, the thrust of Taylor's book unites a concern about social and epistemological issues in a way which is consistent with Polanyi's philosophical interests.

The bulk of the book teases out the senses in which the individualism of self-fulfillment is grounded in a valid authenticity rather than a narcissistic self absorption. Consistent with Polanyi's emphasis upon convivial traditions (although directly drawing on Bakktin), Taylor insists authenticity is grounded in the dialogical character of human existence. He thereby counters atomistic notions of selfhood. Our identity "is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense. If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes internal to my identity" (p. 34). Taylor fights against the notion, central to some versions of autonomy, that subjective choice itself confers worth. Rather he affirms that "independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life" (p. 39).

Discussions of the good life are central to personal and social identity for Taylor. He opposes the "liberalism of neutrality" (p. 17) as unauthentic, much as Polanyi opposed supposed objective inquiry. Rather than allow social science to explain away the stances of contemporary culture, he argues for a dynamic "politics of democratic will-formation" (p.118) which is itself enframed by an ethic of caring and rational discourse.

The convergences between Taylor's and Polanyi's thought are many. They each affirm the importance of viewing humans as historical, embodied beings thinking from a background of commitments toward specific objectives. In attacking thoughtless reliance upon instrumental reason and technology, Taylor carries out a project that has similarities to Polanyi's attack on communist illusions of control over science and society and his dismissal of objectivist claims to certainty in thinking.

While there is an apparent similarity of Taylor to Polanyi with respect to the issue of nihilism, Taylor's position seems to be more consistently developed (perhaps because it is less fully developed). Each sees that normless freedom (negative freedom indiscriminately applied) carries within it the seeds of nihilism. Polanyi shows how moral passions linked with skepticism or cynicism and an emphasis on anti-authoritarian freedom leads to the various forms of nihilistic moral inversion in this century. Yet Polanyi also appreciates the importance of freedom in

scientific inquiry and the free marketplace. Polanyi protects against incipient nihilism in free scientific inquiry when he speaks of the importance of scientific journals, review processes, and community authority in judging scientific hypotheses. But his logic of economic liberty is not as carefully protected by norms, as the legacy of the Reagan years suggests.

The Ethics of Authenticity deals with issues that Alasdair MacIntyre tackled in *After Virtue*, Christopher Lasch addressed in *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*, and Robert Bellah et. al. considered in *Habits of the Heart*. Charles Taylor's reflections on these issues, while not as wide ranging as those in the other books, is insightful--a recommended read.

The Problem of Universals, Edited and with Introductions by Andrew B. Schoedinger (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1992). Pp. x + 360. Hb: ISBN 0-391-03725-0. Pb: 0-391-03726-9.

Reviewed by Philip A. Rolnick

Andrew Schoedinger has given us a fine compilation of texts which address the problem of universals. The selections begin with Plato and Aristotle, continue through the Medieval period, include modern English and German philosophers, and end with a host of relatively recent thinkers, such as Russell, Quine, Carnap, Donagan, Bambrough, and others. On the whole, the texts are appropriately chosen and arranged so as to highlight debated points. Generally the work is well balanced, presenting the various historical options which philosophers have portrayed, from Plato's and some modern writers' holding to the existence of separate substances, to the conceptualists, to the denial of universals except in name (nominalists), to the denial that there is a problem as historically presented (Wittgenstein et al.).

The virtual omission of the question of the *source* of what is universal predetermines and limits the boundaries of discussion. How universals have come to be hardly comes up in the various essays, although theistic writers such as Aquinas and Ockham are included. R. I. Aaron, whose essay argues that universals are both "natural recurrences" and "principles of grouping or classifying," does see that "there is admittedly a metaphysical problem . . . . What is the final explanation of the recurrences in nature?" As Aaron notes about his own discussion, and as I would note about Schoedinger's collected essays, "ultimate questions are left unanswered" (344). Nonetheless, what the book does attempt to do, it does quite well.

Schoedinger's introductions to each writer are succinct and helpful. His general Introduction, being limited to less than two pages, is too succinct. What he does offer seems to imply a position in some manner leaning toward a variant of the realist position. A bolder attempt at synthesis, one which indicated his own position in greater depth, would be welcome. However, what he says about the problem of universals is clear enough:

> it is a real problem because particulars are, and can only be, described by their characteristics. Such characteristics are qualities and qualities are what are generally understood to be universals (xi).

He then adds (borrowing a theme of Bertrand Russell's) that relations as well as qualities must come under consideration as one takes on this problem.

Schoedinger ventures to say: "There is another way of viewing the primacy of universals. Without them there could be no language as we understand it" (*ibid*.). Then offering a quick rebuttal of ostension as the sole constituent of language, Schoedinger contends that "the *recognition* of characteristics and the formulations of nouns is symbiotic" (x, emphasis added). This symbiosis of recognition and subsequent language formulation re-

sembles Polanyi's tacit/articulate symbiosis, as does Schoedinger's conclusion: "Consequently, the nature of universals is ultimately associated with human thinking" (*ibid*.). In what I take as a further similarity to Polanyi, Schoedinger suggests that universals have to do with "resemblances that exist in the world around us" (*ibid*.). The issues are given fuller treatment in the edited selections.

Those interested in Polanyi's work will find that *The Problem of Universals* bears strongly upon Polanyi's notion of "universal intent" and thus upon his very notion of "personal knowledge." What does Polanyi mean by `universal'? Where in the historical scheme of things would Polanyi's work be situated? Where should Polanyi's thought be positioned on the spectrum of realist-conceptualist-nominalist? A close reading of the selections in *The Problems of Universals* might discipline much of the current debate among students of Polanyi regarding Polanyi's allegedly realist universalism or lack thereof. For example, W. V. Quine compares some of the older and newer terminology of the debate: "Logicism holds that classes are discovered while intuitionism holds that they are invented--a fair statement indeed of the old opposition between realism and conceptualism" (166). Where would Polanyi stand in this discussion? Or, when David Pears, who argues that there are no universals, declares: "It is impossible to cross the gap between language and things without really crossing it," Polanyi's very different treatment of "crossing a logical gap," making "contact with reality," etc., come to mind, if only in opposition to Pears.

Working from a very different perspective, Bertrand Russell takes a clear and bold stand on universals:

> a *universal* will be anything which may be shared by many particulars, and has those characteristics which . . . distinguish justice and whiteness from just acts and white things. . . . all truths involve universals, and all knowledge of truths involves acquaintance with universals (115).

Accusing Russell of being misled by language in a far-reaching way, F. P. Ramsey asserts that "the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality, what is merely a characteristic of language" (123). Likewise, R. Bambrough declares "that Wittgenstein solved what is known as `the problem of universals,'" praising it as one of the greatest discoveries of the humanities in recent times (266).

Yet Polanyi overtly distanced himself from Wittgenstein's "language game" view: "The purpose of the philosophic pretence of being merely concerned with grammar is to contemplate and analyse reality, while denying the act of doing so" (*PK* 114).Polanyi was not only aware of this historical debate about universals, he explicitly addressed it in some of his essays published in *Knowing and Being*: "To understand verbal communication requires that we resolve the problem of universals" (190). In these essays, Polanyi offers his explanation of the problem with his unique solution (See, especially, *KB* 165-172). Here and in *Personal Knowledge* (114) Polanyi contends that universals refer to "real entities." He not only thinks that there is a metaphysical entity referred to by universals, but actually goes so far as to claim that in making their claims, scientists are "swearing by the existence of this reality" (*KB* 172). Such claims position him as strongly realist. However, he points out that the historical difficulty arises from the attempt to make explicit what cannot be. And here Polanyi declares that "the secret can be found in a tacit operation of the mind" (*KB* 191). I think that the tacit dimension takes Polanyi beyond language in insisting that "the truth of a proposition lies in its bearing on reality" (*KB* 172). Hence, in order to understand Polanyi's realism, one would have to investigate its relation to the tacit dimension, a project which is beyond the scope of this review.

The Problem of Universals, as Andrew Schoedinger has presented it, is a problem that students

of Polanyi could fruitfully ponder further. Wrestling with the selections of this text would be well worth the effort.

Contributors To This Issue

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Philip Rolnick earned his Ph. D. at Duke University and is Assistant Professor at Greensboro College in Greensboro, NC 27401. His *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God* (forthcoming Scholars Press in Spring of '93) includes some use of Polanyi's philosophical ideas.

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