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Practical reasoning as creative social imagination

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ABSTRACT: According to Charles Taylor, practical reasoning helps us overcome cultural conflicts of value when we are able to show that the passage from one value to another represents an epistemic gain. This paper argues that practical reasoning can be effective in pathological cases of cultural convergence but only if it is understood as a species of the creative social imagination.

KEYWORDS: Castoriadis, imagination, practical reasoning, Ricoeur, Taylor, values.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Charles Taylor, the species of practical reasoning he calls reasoning in transitions or *ad hominem* argumentation can help us overcome a conflict of value when we are able to show that the passage from one value to another represents an epistemic gain. Taylor's position has attracted many social and moral philosophers who have grown increasingly skeptical of the epistemic and motivational promises of what Taylor calls apodictic reasoning. Apodictic reasoning works by drawing exclusive conclusions from uncontested foundational premises that operate as criteria of arbitration (Taylor 1995: 41). Examples of such premises may include the invariant structure of objective value or some highly rationalized features of moral willing and human action. The model of apodictic reasoning functions in the same way in both of its two main varieties: the teleological (which involves criterial forms of means-ends calculation) and the deontological (based on a principle of maxim universalization according to which instances of partial success denote failures of application). It also reduces the semantic-evaluative and the psychological aspects of practical reasoning to a narrow, logical-discursive dimension. As a result, much of the richness of the Aristotelian notion of phronesis is lost in the empty formalism of modern procedural rationality.

Taylor's own version of practical reasoning on the other hand seeks to overcome this impoverished conception of human agency and rationality by focusing on the "motivationally potent, identity-expressive strong values" that provide our choices with ethical content (Smith 2002: 45). This also promises to better capture the consensus-building evaluative resources, whether cognitive or motivational, that allow us to overcome the differences between the often incompatible belief systems of those groups, communities or societies that are fragmented along culturally constituted systems of value. But can practical reasoning, as Taylor explains it, overcome *deeply* cultural conflicts of value, where the values espoused by the conflicting parties are not only incompatible but perhaps also incommensurable? And can it avoid sanctioning ideological forms of culturally reproduced evaluative consensus? Furthermore, assuming Taylor's conception of practical rea-

soning can do these things, is this because of any perceived gain in moral knowledge? Or is it, rather, for reasons that are not fully explicit in Taylor's own account?

Against Taylor's excessively optimistic view of practical reasoning and in line with the latter suggestion, this paper argues, first, that reasoning in transitions or *ad hominem* argumentation will overcome conflicts of value but only in those societies or social groups where there is some preliminary, although perhaps implicit or unconscious, evaluative consensus among the members of the group or society. This consensus is around some fundamental value, what Taylor calls a constitutive good. Radically fragmented or divided societies may be able to reach such agreement based on the need for survival, but as long as this does not become an instance of valuing life, such consensus will always be contingent on external conditions that are rarely subject to rational scrutiny. Second, as Jürgen Habermas and other critical theorists convincingly show in a different context of explanation, Taylor's version of practical reasoning may be unable to undermine the allegiance to repressive values in pathologically developed societies (Habermas 2001: 144-156). In such societies, external conditions of undistorted, free argumentation must be created that would provide reasoners with the necessary argumentative resources to effect those transformative transitions that result in an increase in rationality and moral cognition. Absent such conditions, *ad homimem* argumentation will always succumb to its most destructive inclinations. Lastly, practical reasoning seems hardly capable of delivering on its promises when its anthropological basis is too far removed from the moral psychology of what in a different context Richard Rorty called the liberal ironist (Rorty 1989: 73). This label is shorthand for the type of disposition that supports the self-reflective ethical personality of individuals who possess a highly contextual and deeply historical view of the world and their role in it. What is peculiar about these types is their commitment to values that promote and enhance human solidarity in a very general and socio-historically fluid sense of this word. This both excludes endorsing some other values as foundational as well as privileges the instrumental values that make possible the kind of transformative practical reasoning that Taylor calls reasoning in transitions.

These three conditions, the ethical condition of preliminary value convergence in a culture, the political condition of communicative socialization through uncoerced argumentation, and the condition of psychological detachment and reflectivity (achieved through skepticism about foundational values) are both mutually dependent as well as mutually enhancing. If, however, practical reasoning is unable to break a culturally robust monopoly on value; if it is prone to ideological deformations that operate through repressive cultural values; if it is premised on a type of self-conception that is only available to individuals in highly rational, modern societies; and given what we know about the existence of the type of societies that fulfill such conditions, shouldn't we give up on the hope that such form of argumentation is based in reason? In the remainder of the paper I suggest, without going into much detail, that practical reasoning's potential to interpret, transform and internalize values can be enhanced through the appeal to the motivational power of utopias, mythologies, symbolic images and other vehicles of semantic innovation. This, I argue, levels the socially and culturally deformed playing fields that make *ad hominem* argumentation effective. Reasoning in transitions will work in cases of pathological socialization, ideological value reproduction, and moral dogmatism, but only if it is regarded as a species of the creative social imagination. This further implies that the emphasis on the kind of reasoning schemes that tend to be favored in standard textbook

treatments (means-ends calculations, say, or cases of material incompatibility, as demonstrated by failures in maxim universalization; for illustration of these, see Walton's important 1990 book) must be weakened to make room for the motivational and cognition-enhancing capacity of those rhetorical devices that do the work of the imagination and create the conditions under which such schemes could be effective. After presenting some elements of Taylor's specific conception of practical reasoning, the paper will address in more detail the objections presented earlier while formulating a more developed response to these based on a selective reconstruction of some of the ideas of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) and Paul Ricoeur (1986, 1991).

2. PRACTICAL REASONING AS STRONG EVALUATION

Taylor's account of practical reasoning is deeply informed by his suspicion towards what Max Horkheimer had called the subjectivization of reason decades earlier (Horkheimer 1974: 3-57). This was the exclusive focus on procedural conceptions of rationality that originate in the Enlightenment project of detaching reason from the objective sources of normative authority of the cultural tradition (Taylor 1995: 40-41). Taylor's own alternative, as will hopefully emerge from this reconstruction, is to maintain a moment of self-reflective autonomy within the wider context of our evaluations while at the same time abandoning the proceduralist ideal in practical reasoning and theoretical explanation that in his view is responsible for hollowing out both reason and the practice of evaluation itself. In Taylor's view, the proceduralist vein of the modern conceptions of knowledge and action is one of the final stages in the gradual process of the naturalization of reason and the rationalization of human nature (Taylor 1995: 38). This on the one hand promised and on the other promoted an ideal of human autonomy in which the subject, whether practical or theoretical, is perceived as the only authoritative source of binding rules for cognition and action. However, despite some obvious advantages, the model of reasoning developed from this ideal suffers from severe normative indeterminacy. For making the subject the source of conceptual content typically results in a form of agent relativity that takes one's contingency as the only valid source of normative insight and legitimacy (which ultimately undermines the liberating claims of subjective rationality and hence ends up subordinating the ideal of autonomy to voluntarism and its political avatar, decisionism). On the other hand, granting conceptual contents their normative independence results in the uncritical endorsement of unexamined forces of socio-historical contingency. Some such forces are the forms of ethical life that undermine the meaningful exercise of autonomy by deriving normative authority from pathological forms of social interaction. The only alternative to these is the return to a situated type of practical reason that avoids drawing on metaphysical premises while providing a satisfactory account of a context-dependent, yet not entirely contingent, source of normativity. Taylor believes that his conception of strong evaluation offers this account, for the "vocabularies we need to explain human thought, action, feeling, or to explicate, analyze, justify ourselves or each other, or to deliberate on what to do, all inescapably rely on strong evaluation" (Taylor 1995: 39). His is a conception that explains the evaluation of all initial orientations toward various goods, our first level desires of objects or other such immediate, unreflected ends—what Taylor calls weak or quantitative evaluation—on a higher level,

where we are preoccupied not with the immediate satisfaction of desires but, rather, with the quality of our motivation (Taylor 1985: 17).

Now, clearly, all evaluation requires some standards, however implicit they may be, and the necessary appeal to these is what Taylor explains with the help of the notion of import. Imports represent ascriptions of meaning in determinate situations of desiring that demand choice, such as experiencing shame in relation to something that elicits it (Taylor 1985: 48). These imports are internalizations of goods, that is, standards by virtue of which we determine what "matters", what is of value for us in strong evaluation (Taylor 1989: 33). And, given that the content of imports is always drawn from within a cultural community's horizon of meaning, it follows that strong evaluation appeals to a source of value that is both accessed as well as constituted by the individual in her evaluations (Taylor 1989: 26-27, 91-92). Strong evaluation, therefore, represents a moment of self-transcendence within a given context of moral meaning, a form of situated and at the same time empirically achieved evaluative autonomy.

As is well known, Taylor introduces several categories of goods. First, there are what he calls life-goods, and, within this category, but ranking higher, the hypergoods, "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about" (Taylor 1989: 63). Then, at the top of the scale, come the constitutive goods, what Taylor also calls moral sources, that is, grounds that validate as well as enhance the motivational power of all the other life goods (Taylor 1989: 93, 1991: 243). If we take into account these distinctions between categories of goods, it becomes clear that for Taylor practical reasoning (now conceived of as strong evaluation) means finding one's way on the evaluative map by learning which goods apply and when, in which order, whether some have priority and in which circumstances, or whether their content changes in the context of application. Strong evaluation therefore fulfills several functions. First, it shows that it can shape practical agency by privileging the strong evaluator, the self-reflective subject of practical maxims and rules, at the expense of the weak "weigher of alternatives." In contrast, traditional apodictic reasoning assumes a concept of agency that it cannot explain let alone shape. The agent in this tradition is the self-transparent and self-controlled, detached subject who possesses an unexplainable capacity for autonomous action that is always directed by the right reasons and appropriately responds to these with the right type of action. Much of our experience with such agents and the type of actions they engage in shows us that this is almost never the case.

Second, this process of strong evaluation is one of both moral learning as well as cognitive self-clarification. The agent learns much about what motivates her to action in the process of examining the moral worth of her first-level desires in relation to the higher standards, or the goods. At the same time, this forces her to focus on the numerous variables over which the goods range and determine whether they are compatible with one another or with the goods themselves. The activity is also one that brings into focus the implicit hierarchy of goods that need to be harmonized when desires clash or when certain types of goods are revealed as inoperative standards of evaluation. As a result, the meaning of the goods is further determined in the course of interpretations that are triggered by the effort to apply standards of evaluation to conflicting desires. All this would be impossible on the apodictic model of practical reasoning which applies criteria within a binary logic of exclusion between true and false, right and wrong, etc. Generating con-

tents and forming the will is not part of what this type of reasoning typically does or sets out to do. And this shows that reasoning in transitions is more of an art of application, as in Aristotle, than a reliable technique for drawing materially correct inferences.

Only if practical reasoning is exercised in a space that has been previously naturalized (or formalized, or rationalized), which is to say, sanitized, or cleared of any reference to moral contents that become available through strong evaluation, could we find comfort in the kind of proceduralist form of evaluation that draws on nothing but itself. The alternative would not be to

> […] disprove some radically opposed first premise (say killing people is no problem), but rather to show how the policy is unconscionable on premises which both sides accept, and cannot but accept. In this case, its job is to show up the special pleas. … On this model…practical argument starts off on the basis that my opponent shares at least some of the fundamental dispositions toward good and right which guide me. The error comes from confusion, lack of clarity, or an unwillingness to face some of what he can't lucidly repudiate; and reasoning aims to show up this error. Changing someone's moral view by reasoning is always at the same time increasing his self-clarity and self-understanding. (Taylor 1995: 36)

3. REASONING IN TRANSITIONS

Taylor explains reasoning in transitions in two different contexts: the context of theoretical or scientific explanation and the context of moral argumentation. In each context he introduces two types of transitions, one more radical than the other, which gradually move us away from the model of apodictic reasoning. The first type of transition consists of providing an interpretation of the world (of nature or of human affairs) that is better at explaining some physical anomalies or moral conflicts than the model it tries to supersede. The transition is regarded as providing some cognitive gain.

Taylor's example of such a gain centers on the transition from the Aristotelian model of explanation of violent motion to the Galilean, which takes into account such physical facts as the gravitational pull of the earth and the force of inertia (Taylor 1995: 43-47). Such a transition, Taylor argues, cannot be settled on the apodictic, criterial model of reasoning that claims to settle disputes based on incontestable epistemic principles, for in this model there can be no mediating epistemic principle that could do justice to both theories, and clearly not on their own terms. One theory looks at final causes and at our place in the moral universe, the other deals with our capacity for model manipulation and efficient control based on reliable prediction. What we do have, however, is the realization that we can make sense of the transition from the Aristotelian to the Galilean model but not the other way around. This is because the latter can account for both models on its own terms, whereas the former cannot. Thus, even when the two models are ultimately based in different or perhaps incompatible world-views or systems of value (one governed by the need to figure out one's moral position in the universe, the other by a naturalistic ideal of explanation that has already decided what that position is or that it need not concern itself with such questions) one can move from one to the other without having to decide the transition by appeal to criteria that both models could accept. The transition is a gradual abandonment of one position for another based on the realization that the latter is comparatively "better" on the ground of some "extra-epistemic considerations" (Taylor 1995: 46). The new theory or point of view is "better" not because of some special epistemic insight gained through consistent application of criteria but because, as

Richard Rorty has put it in a similar context of explanation, "they come to seem as better" (Rorty 1982: xxxvii). The judgment involved is comparative, not apodictic. We realize what the superseded position was aiming for, but now we are pursuing something different, which is why we have no choice but to jettison the previous one as comparatively useless. And, turning now to moral explanations, a similar type of account could justify the move from, say, an honor-based system of economic activity to a class-based one, and then the move from the ethics that underlies the latter to a capacity based ethics that emphasizes the worth of qualities other than lineage or social position. In these cases we are dealing with a transition that can be described as a gain in moral understanding but only from the standpoint provided by the individualistic ethos that can satisfy the production requirements of the capitalist socio-economic system. From the perspective of the ancient code of honor, the protestant ethic is incomprehensible.

The second type of transition Taylor discusses illustrates not epistemic gain but, rather, error-reduction in cases of moral confusion about what values one truly endorses, or about which ones should take precedence in situations of conflict between two sets of values or their instantiation. Taylor's examples deal with situations when we correct a previous interpretation of our moral situation in relation to our perception of the good. The interpretation in all such cases is a transition that is mediated by a change in our interpretation of that good, or of what the good requires of us. Just like in the previous type of transition, the change that comes to be seen as the correction of an error looks more like a clarification of one's position than a decisive appeal to foundations. In cases of moral clarification reasoning in transitions means "making appeal to our implicit understanding of our forms of life" (Taylor 1995: 49), that is, clarifying how we stand in relation to values, which values we truly endorse, how we respond to conflicts of value, etc. In other words, figuring out our position on a given moral map and, in the process, improving on its contents.

Now, when Taylor talks about transitions, he clearly indicates that the justification for moving from one position to another is provided by the transition itself, which often sounds like a concession to an ethnocentric and historicist mode of understanding. However, for a transition to also qualify as *ad hominem* argumentation, it would have to provide the grounds for motivating a reasoner to accept the evaluative result of the transition. This, however, cannot be the work of the transition itself, and neither can it be the result of embracing the newly clarified or emerging value or value horizon. If the transition is also a form of strong evaluation, and if the evaluation consists in weighing desires based on interpretations of goods and internalizing such interpreted goods, it will follow that the motivating factor must be the value that moves one to engage in the transition. This value could be implicit in one's other valuations, and the agent clarifies it or makes it explicit in a process of evaluation that is initiated from the standpoint provided by a different value. The value could also be a hypergood we initially mistook for an ordinary good and as a result relegated to a subordinated position. But I do not see it as being located in or generated by the transition itself. Which further suggests that the motivational dimension that makes reasoning in transitions an *ad hominem* form of argumentation is based in some higher-level consensus, however implicit, on what agents would accept as a common constitutive good. And so the transition must be one between interpretations of what best represents and satisfies our interests, that is, a higher-level good. (Here one is tempted to argue that Taylor's model of practical reasoning does not look that much dif-

ferent from the one he criticizes; perhaps the emphasis should not be on the appeal to criteria but, rather, to the bi-univocal relationship between principle and application that can account for the gradual shift of meaning that occurs in transitions.)

Earlier I argued that one could not expect any such transitions to take place unless three conditions are satisfied. First is the condition of minimal ethical convergence toward some constitutive good that could motivate the transition from one interpretation to another even in cases where the transition is as radical as in the move from Aristotelian to Galilean physics. In this example, one can arguably show that the gain in understanding was motivated not by a fresh look at the "facts" but, rather, by a decision to consider facts as the preferred framework for an interpretation of our place in the world of value, one that promised to bring us closer to value, rather than closer to the facts. The dispute between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine could be described then as a conflict over the proper normative source of epistemic authority—facts versus the tradition—rather than a dispute over the meaning of scientific truth. But how could one persuade someone to abandon one interpretation for another if the gap between the positions is so wide that no value convergence seems possible? In all fairness, Taylor (1995: 50, 58-59) himself admits that this may pose a formidable obstacle. Absent such convergence, there is very little that could motivate the transition and thus appear as a gain, and the alternative seems to be a form of ethical Alexandrinism, a cacophony of parochial interests that vie for supremacy.

The second condition deals with the need for having a relatively open space for practical argumentation, free from political or other forms of interference such as distortions in moral perception caused by an ideological production of value convergence. This affects all models of practical reasoning, but more so reasoning in transitions, which must rely on the superior motivational power of alternative interpretations of the good to present the move from one position to another as error reducing or as an epistemic gain. Values may distort reasoning by often making it impossible for us to identify which needs must be selected for generalization as legitimate interests, that is, as appropriate candidates for providing content to practical norms (Rehg 2002: 145). Another version of such distortion is when the choice of interests is steered by an evaluative context that has evolved over time under all kinds of critically unexamined socio-economic and cultural pressures. In both situations, practical reasoning will perform a purely instrumental function aimed at improving the efficiency of decision mechanisms based on a consensus that barely responds to the needs of those involved. Needless to say, when such deformations happen, the transition to an epistemically superior moral position is fatally hindered by the inability to appeal to the kind of value that properly satisfies needs by responding to legitimate interests. One cannot find motivational resources in an alternative interpretation of the good if there is no room to engage in such interpretation due to pathological conditions of socio-political development.

Finally, reasoning in transitions seems to depend on a particular type of anti-dogmatic moral personality or ethical temperament that is usually the product of a liberal culture that both encourages as well as is shaped by transitions and effective *ad hominem* argumentation. Transitioning is unlikely if the target of the *ad hominem* argument is too dogmatically tied to a particular interpretation of value to respond to what the new interpretation demands. All this seems to indicate that in order for reasoning in transitions to succeed it must be backed up by a rhetorical component that could facilitate the transition at the motivational level. This could explain the leap in motivational space from one in-

terpretation of value to another (or from one value to another) as a shift in the social imagination that compels us to accept a new position in moral space and thereby to engage in the transition that will also justify it. In the following I briefly discuss this possibility by looking at two accounts of the social imagination and of the resources it mobilizes in pursuit of interest-expressive value convergence or to encourage normative disruptions when the values repress needs.

4. THE CREATIVE SOCIAL IMAGINATION

The philosophical tradition speaks of different kinds of imagination. However, only one of these kinds is useful in the present context, and this is the productive or creative imagination that is operative in analogical thinking and symbolic action. Kant made it possible for us to understand the working of the imagination in these terms in his account of moral symbolism through aesthetic ideas and in his discussion of the phenomenon of sublimity as the imaginative leap from the realm of inadequate aesthetic presentation into the domain of moral ideas. This way of understanding the imagination has been taken up and applied in a more useful way (for the present discussion) to the sphere of the social and of the ethical by Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricoeur. The former is important because he, like Clifford Geertz before him, provides us with an understanding of the social world, the world of representation and action and of social communication and institutions, as one that is symbolically structured in a way that always leaves room for a surplus of signification that cannot be reduced to what is signified (Castoriadis 1987: 117, 127). The social imagination operates through symbols, which allows it to mobilize this surplus in ways that redefine the horizon of meaning. This in turn determines the identity of a society, the symbolic space within which this society understands itself. The following quotation captures this very nicely:

> Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking? Society must define its 'identity,' its articulation, the world, its relations to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires. Without the 'answer' to these 'questions,' without these 'definitions,' there can be no human world, no society, no culture…. The role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither 'reality' nor 'rationality' can provide… . (Castoriadis 1987: 146-147)

Needless to say, this is also precisely what is required in reasoning in transitions: the capacity to expand one's self-understanding in the world of symbolically instituted significance by means of the imaginary use of the surplus of signification (Castoriadis 1987: 370 f.).

Ricoeur, on the other hand, who shares many of Castoriadis' views on symbolic action and the imaginary institution of society, gives us a very detailed account of how the creative social imagination uses the surplus of signification. He claims it uses this surplus in situations of ideological value-convergence or radical non-convergence, or in cases where the person with whom one argues is too dogmatically tied to a particular value-interpretation, too stuck in a self-conception to be moved in a way that may signal a transition from one good to another or from one interpretation of the good to one that is better. For Ricoeur, the essential distinction in practical reasoning is between inference and analogical thinking. Thinking through analogies is a perfect example of semantic innovation of the type that we see in the use of metaphors or in other forms of symbolic

thinking, and the symbolic action that institutes society is just an extension of symbolic thinking. Given this notion of practical reasoning, the role of the imagination must be to generate such innovation and thereby motivate transitions that will also re-describe society and symbolically restructure its evaluative contents in the process (Ricoeur 1991: 168-175).

The imagination is directly involved in the very process of motivation that creates or destroys the links between selves and values or interpretations of values. Two, mutually antagonistic but dialectically related modes of the imagination (or imaginative practices, as Ricoeur also calls them) operate in this way: ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1986: 250-259). The former is a practice that in its non-pathological mode leads to social integration by symbolically constituting the most elementary social bonds. Ideology exerts this power by finding analogies that reinforce what is common in one's orientation to value and rejecting interpretations that create divisions with no basis in value. When one seeks to overcome apparent differences in value orientation, we can effect the transition from one position to another only because we can emphasize what we have in common. This is the job of ideological imaginary practices. Discourses of solidarity typically have this form.

Utopia on the other hand has a subversive function. It is eccentric, erratic, and wandering. Semantic innovation is more pronounced in the utopian mode of the imagination, as is the case in all other forms of analogical thinking. The disruptions caused by the utopian imagination "open the field of the possible beyond that of the actual, a field for alternative ways of living" (Ricoeur 1991: 320). As an aide to practical reasoning, the utopian mode of the imagination helps break the hold of those repressive values that have assumed an ideological function by covering up needs that can only be satisfied by engaging in a transition. In this sense, the utopian imagination puts us in a position to see that a transition is error reducing or may result in a gain. If ideology achieves integration through solidarity around a shared but implicit value, utopias often point out that one has lost sight of a value, or that one has subordinated a value to another, less-important one in a way that distorts our actual value-orientations. Both modes help practical reasoning effect its transitions; to some extent, they *are* practical reasoning because no *ad hominem* would work without their help.

5. CONCLUSION

I have argued in the preceding pages that Taylor's conception of practical reasoning works better than the apodictic model in modern, value pluralist societies. I have also suggested that this conception must include an account of the necessary conditions of free socialization and undistorted reproduction of cultural value without which practical reasoning would rarely engage in any real or meaningful transitions. Yet the fact that such transitions materialize even in the absence of such conditions seems to indicate that this model of practical reasoning generates some of its moral content through the semantic innovation that is performed by the social imagination.

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Commentary on 'PRACTICAL REASONING AS CREATIVE SOCIAL IMAGINATION' by Radu Neculau

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In Dr. Neculau's fine and subtle paper, he agrees with Charles Taylor (1995: 34-60) that the model of apodictic reasoning is inadequate to the nature of ethical judgement, and in particular to ethical conflict resolution. Dr. Neculau holds that Taylor's model of practical reasoning, understood as the kind of reasoning that effects transitions from one kind of ethical belief or behavior to another, is the correct model for ethical judgement and conflict resolution. However, Dr. Neculau claims that there is a key feature missing in Taylor's model of practical reasoning: namely, the "semantic innovations" offered by the products of creative imagination operative in analogical thinking and symbolic action, which possess a powerful rhetorical component that can effect ethical transition, even in "pathologically developed" societies. Shelley's well-known dictum that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is relevant here, as are Robert Browning's lines: "But art…/…art may tell a truth obliquely,/ Do the deed shall breed the thought". Iris Murdoch's *Sovereignty of Good* (1970) also powerfully supports Dr. Neculau's claim.

Most of us, I think, are likely to agree that Dr. Neculau is making an important point. How much it affects Taylor's theory of practical reasoning, I leave to discussion. What I am not at all sure about is Dr. Neculau's account of the nature of "strong evaluation", the nature of our commitment to constitutive goods, those accounts of ultimate moral sources "that validate as well as enhance the motivational power of all other life goods". Constitutive goods, Dr. Neculau says, are "social constructs", the product of socio-historical development, but their validity extends beyond their situated origin and "their *ontological status* is not reducible to any socio-historical contingencies" (my emphasis). It is Dr. Neculau's acknowledgment of the role that constitutive goods play in ethical conflict that leads to his "return to a situated type of practical reasoning that *avoids drawing on metaphysical premises* while providing a satisfactory account of a context-dependent, yet *not entirely contingen*t, source of normativity" (my emphases).

If Dr. Neculau is right about the role of the creative imagination, then in the light of his account of the ontological status of constitutive goods, I think creative imagination involves much more than what he naturalistically calls "semantic innovation". Rather, creative imagination is the engine of ontological innovation. There is perhaps a tension here between a strong Taylorian ontological emphasis one side, and some sort of inter-subjectivist naturalism on the other side—a tension that needs addressing.

To press the point, Dr. Neculau talks of constitutive goods naturalistically, in terms of "desires", "needs" and "interests", whereas, as I shall show, a characteristic of constitutive goods is that they transcend desires, needs and interests in any ordinary sense of those terms.

More importantly, Dr. Neculau argues against Taylor's view that "the justification for moving from one [ethical] position to another is provided by the transition itself". For Dr. Neculau, such a view "sounds like a concession to an ethnocentric and historicist mode of understanding".

By contrast, Dr. Neculau holds that for an ethical "transition to… qualify as *ad hominem* argumentation, it would also have to provide the grounds for motivating a reasoner to accept the evaluative result of the transition. This, however, cannot be the work of the transition itself… If the transition is also a form of strong evaluation… it will follow that the motivating factor must be the value that moves one to engage in the transition… I do not see [the value] as being located in or generated by the transition itself".

This, I suspect, is a very questionable claim. Take an example that Taylor refers to (1995: 57): the non-belligerent spread of early Christianity in the Mediterranean world. The new and transformative constitutive good or ethico-ontological principle that grew and developed there, amid a complex of material-historical conditions, is the principle and ideal of *agape* or unconditional love for others, whatever their nature, good or evil, and beyond any need, desire or interest on the part of the love-giver. One consequence of this principle—not, as is often thought, its basis—is of course the view that persons are absolute ends in themselves, a view which has vexed us to nightmare in the West, and now indeed haunts the whole world

The key question is: how did the transition to the fundamental principle of *agape* happen? Movements such as Christianity, as well as Buddhism, represent insights into the potentialities of human nature and human relations which at one time were insights into hitherto undreamt of ways of acting. They have indeed subsequently become, as the discourse theorist would say, the subject of considerable agreement, in virtue of immensely complex historical developments. These movements define and constitute for many (consciously or not) that object we call 'human nature and relations'. And how did they do that? Not indeed primarily by discursive agreement or consensus at all, but primarily by action, by *exemplary action*, and thus by edification. In these movements, it is exemplary action that uncovers and actualizes the potentialities of the object. There was not a body of rules that were agreed, and then acted, upon. The rules could only be articulated in action, and only by action did they come to be understood, even by their proponents. It is by action above all that an ethical object is constituted; the reasons then follow. No doubt from the start it was supposed by the initiating agents that such actions could be justified; but even that was difficult for them, not least because it was contrary to prevailing attitudes—folly to the Greeks! The crucial thing is that the actions uncovered new features of the object, and it is the newly perceived and newly apprehended object which is the basis of the subsequent rules and justifications.

Here, in other words, are examples of world-historical transitions where the valuation is in fact located wholly in the transition and is wholly generated in the transition itself. Reasoning in transition cannot ignore edification, the primacy of action over thought, and even over symbolic interchange. It is not only artists who "Do the deed shall breed the thought". There is a real if nowadays often overlooked place in practical reasoning for the hero, the saint and the guru.

Allow me to go one step further, and ask this: does not Dr. Neculau's account of practical reasoning, far from naturalistically avoiding "metaphysical premises", in fact have a metaphysical basis itself, a basis which alone explains why practical reasoning

gives rise to values that are at once social constructs with ontological status? This metaphysical basis, I suggest, resides in what has been called the ontological theory of truth (Campbell 1992: 56ff.): namely the theory that truth is a state or relation of the real. Here, whether articulated in a platonic, scholastic, idealist or Peircean-pragmatist framework, the real is understood to be an activity of disclosure or manifestation.

The crucial point is that, since the rise of Christianity, this activity of disclosure or manifestation is held to occur in history and to be intrinsically a matter of the movement of history. In contrast to Greek views of truth, truth is not a timeless state of affairs. It must occur, and it must be unfolded and realized again and again in new situations that shed fresh light on it. It is as such intrinsically connected to actions in time. As a result, truth is not a reality that lies behind appearances, but is something that emerges in history and is nothing other than its realization in the contingent materiality of the movement of history, even though the real, with all its indeterminate potentialities, is more than any of its specific historical manifestations. History is thus not reducible to mere happenstance: the unity of the real and the historical is a relation of realization, a matter of the actualization of potentialities. We are here far beyond any form of relativizing historicism: reality itself is understood as a continuum of indeterminate potentialities which come to determination in the actions and thoughts of historical agents. Reality itself is constructive in nature, and this is the real reason why Dr. Neculau's creative imagination is so important.

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