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Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection

Michael Taylor

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After Green and Shapiro's groundbreaking critique of the presumed explanatory strength of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), Michael Taylor now criticizes it for its devastating impact on public policy and its failure to do justice to the way in which morality affects our actions. Taylor argues that RCT does a lot of damage because, in contrast to what is commonly presumed, not every problem of scarcity can be solved adequately by means of economic incentives. He also attacks RCT directly. He argues that RCT mistakenly assumes that 'anyone is compensable for any loss', which suggests that anything can fruitfully be regarded as a commodity. The common thread that runs through his criticisms is that (the way in which) RCT (is used) does justice neither to our communal ties — a theme familiar from Taylor's 1982 book *Community, Anarchy and Liberty* — nor to the moral dimension of personal identity. Taylor goes on to provide an alternative account of human action in which the social and moral dimensions of our identity are presented as playing a role orthogonal to that of self-interest.

A telling illustration of the role that social and moral factors can play is Taylor's discussion of LULUs — locally unwanted land uses. Both regulatory and market approaches to this problem tend to evoke the NIMBY or not-in-my-backyard response. Neither imposing decisions on the local community nor persuading its members by means of economic incentives works in these cases. Sometimes they even stiffen local resistance. Taylor argues that in the case of LULUs people do not want to be coerced by governmental agencies nor enticed by economic incentives. Instead they want to be treated as citizens and be in a position to contribute to the collective decision-making process. Crucial ingredients for success are first, that the decision is non-coercive, and second, that the decision process is participative and deliberative. In addition to this, burdens need to be widely shared and assurances must be given against future exploitation. The upshot is that citizenship is to be given due consideration as one of the social affiliations that make a difference with regard to motivation and behaviour.

Taylor recounts the famous day-care experiment conducted in Haifa in 1998 in order to illustrate the limited use of economic incentives and sanctions. A problem from which most day-care centres suffer is that parents often arrive late when collecting their children. The obvious economists' solution is to

introduce a fine for latecomers. Rather than decreasing the number of latecomers, however, more parents arrived late after the fine was introduced. Taylor argues that the introduction of monetary incentives prompted a shift from a moral to an economic conceptualization of their behaviour. Apparently, moral motivation can be more powerful than economic incentives. Throughout his book, Taylor uses cases such as these to reveal some of the problems that beset 'the Market Ideal'. He shows convincingly that RCT ends up supporting 'an ideology of disconnection' from which community and morality are absent. This in turn motivates an investigation of the explanatory role of these factors.

The account of moral motivation that he offers early on in Chapter 7, the pivotal chapter of the book, is heavily influenced by Thomas Scanlon's already seminal book *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998). Reciprocity is best explained, Taylor argues, in terms of an individual's acceptance of the obligating nature of 'the norm of fair reciprocity' rather than in terms of prudential considerations. As Scanlon argues, whether an act is wrong depends on whether it is disallowed by a set of principles 'that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement'. Taylor connects this ideal of justifiability to others to personal identity in order to account for its motivational force. Having defined 'a person's identity' as 'the part of her normative self-understanding that structures and modulates her choices' (xi), he suggests this is an identity-constituting ideal for most people. This means that they will do their part in a cooperative endeavour unless they are not respected and feel used, exploited, or manipulated, or unless they are triggered to reframe the situation in economic terms, as in the day-care experiment discussed above.

Taylor goes on to criticize the social identification argument for cooperation in Prisoners' Dilemma and Public Goods games. The high level of cooperation observed in experiments involving such games is best explained, he argues, in terms of the norm of fair reciprocity. Perhaps the most convincing argument he presents against the social identification argument is that 'there is a great deal of cooperation even without opportunities for discussion or face-to-face interaction or anything else that could plausibly be taken as creating "group identity"' (170–171). Taylor wants to preserve the common sense idea that cooperation can be explained in terms of moral reasons, and in contrast to what is common practice these days he resists reducing their force to that of sanctions or emotional responses. His is a fascinating proposal that deserves serious attention from social scientists in general and social psychologists and experimental economists in particular.

At this stage, Taylor's claims are modest. He maintains that his moral motivation explanation is 'equally consistent with' the data (159), and 'as plausible as' its rivals (163). This is a sensible strategy in an area in which conclusive evidence is not to be had and the main rival view is firmly

entrenched. Earlier in the book, however, Taylor's critique is harsh. There Taylor's ambition appears to be to deal a deathblow to RCT. The main argument offered, however, is not terribly convincing.

One of the axioms of RCT is the Axiom of Archimedes, which Taylor formulates as follows: 'If someone prefers B to A, where she has, let us say, more of some good x at A than she does at B but less of another good y , then there is always some additional amount of y that can be given to her so that her preference will be reversed or she will be indifferent between A and B' (48). In more colloquial terms this amounts to the claim that 'anyone is compensable for any loss'. Taylor sets out to argue that this axiom is violated in practice. The examples he uses pertain to choices that involve two acts only one of which is intimately related to the values with which the person confronted with the choice identifies herself. The book begins with a story about a small peasant village in the French Alps based on John Berger's trilogy *Into Their Labours*. The villagers have a 'profound suspicion of money'. One of the characters in the trilogy, Marcel, refuses to sell his old cider press. His son knows a dealer who is willing to pay a lot of money for the press, who in turn could sell it to a bank or hotel where it would become décor. This outcome appears ridiculous to Marcel, who can hardly comprehend the idea of the press becoming décor in a lobby. The cider press connects him to his past life, family and friends, culture and customs. By selling it Marcel would demean his past life. It would 'disconnect and alienate him from his culture (while contributing to a new one he cannot respect)' (5). Selling the press is simply out of the question.

Examples like this are certainly revealing. They indicate that choice presupposes a way of conceptualizing the world, which in turn requires a cultural context. Choice is also intimately related to one's normative self-understanding, that is, to one's identity. One's culture and one's identity imply a certain way of valuing things, and the values one has may count significantly against certain courses of action. The idea that these insights undermine RCT, however, is ultimately unconvincing. Imagine Marcel's son being very ill. The only way in which he can be saved is by buying very expensive medicine. Would the old man still reject the idea of selling his cider press out of hand? Would he dare to invoke his identity and respond, as he does in Berger's story, by saying 'The world has left the earth behind'?

Taylor also makes some claims that are clearly mistaken. Consider what he writes about RCT and motivation:

Rational Choice Theory sees — *must* see — only one sort of reason for action. [...] Hence, there is in this approach no place for ideals of any sort, including moral ideals. Hence, norms, even moral norms, by themselves have no power to move us. The motivational terrain is, so to speak, uniform or flat. (53)

RCT is in fact silent on the kinds of reasons that figure in our deliberations. 'Preference' is a technical term that has a meaning that is very different from the more colloquial notion of a desire. For all a rational choice theorist cares, the motivational terrain might be as mountainous as can be. Or, more to the point, it might resemble a rainforest rather than a desert.

A more interesting line of criticism starts from the claim that the Humean view that actions require desires in addition to beliefs might be wrong. Instead judgments might suffice as reasons for action. Consider an academic hiring procedure. If you judge that hiring a particular candidate would be best for the department, there may not be a need to possess or form a desire to do what is best for the department in order to decide to vote in favour of this candidate. If anti-Humeans such as Thomas Nagel and John McDowell are right, this does create havoc for RCT. After all, that theory involves a distinction between preferences and expectations, which runs parallel in some respects to that between beliefs and desires. It is unlikely, however, that philosophers will soon reach agreement on the issue. Furthermore, rational choice theorists might not be impressed by an attack along these lines. The attack presumes that preferences are mental states distinct from expectations. I would not be surprised if many rational choice theorists could not care less whether this is true or not.

A kind of critique that is more to the point, I believe, is that RCT does not provide the kind of understanding of human action that we might want (for certain purposes). Taylor makes some scattered remarks about explanation and understanding that point in this direction. Unfortunately, he does not develop this line of thought further. I am certainly sympathetic to his account of moral motivation. However, rather than it being inconsistent with RCT, it seems more to the point to say that RCT is not rich enough for it to provide the means for appreciating the insights it offers. All in all *Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection* is more convincing as testimony of the limits of RCT than as an essay that constitutes its demise.

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