
Review: Précis of Sources of the Self

Reviewed Work(s): Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity by Charles Taylor

Review by: Charles Taylor and Charles Taylor

Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Mar., 1994, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 185-186

Published by: International Phenomenological Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2108365>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

JSTOR

Précis of *Sources of the Self**

CHARLES TAYLOR

McGill University

This book attempts to draw a picture of certain facets of what I call the “modern identity.” By this I mean our contemporary understanding of what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self.

In the first part, I try to show what I think this kind of study entails. I argue that our understanding of our own agency, which varies over history, is closely connected to our understanding of our moral and spiritual predicament, and of our social existence. A crucial role is played in this by a multi-levelled understanding of the good. This is off the horizon of much contemporary moral philosophy, which I think is a severe reflection on it.

The main body of the work comes in the following four parts and tries to trace the development of the facets I want to examine. I begin with what I see as the rise of certain understandings of inwardness which are peculiar to the modern West. The distant sources for this turn are perhaps Augustine, with his belief that the road to contact with God lay inward. But it was transformed in the late Renaissance. I would like to distinguish two modern directions of development of inwardness: a strand stressing self-control, for which Descartes could perhaps be chosen as spokesman; and one concerned with self-exploration, which Montaigne began to elaborate, and which has been further extended and developed through the inventions of Romantic expressivism, right down to our day.

This strand (discussed in Part II) has to be woven into another, which I describe as the affirmation of ordinary life. ‘Ordinary life’ here means the life of work and the family, or production and reproduction. I believe that a crucial thrust in modern western culture comes from a revolution in moral/spiritual thinking which puts the centre of gravity of our existence in ordinary life. The heights of moral excellence are no longer seen as lying in some supposedly “higher” activities, for which ordinary life is infra-structural—contemplation, the warrior or citizen life, the monastic vocation—but in a manner of living in work and family. This begins with the Reformation (here I have

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

been influenced by Weber), but continues and ramifies into secular modes. I explore this in the third Part.

I then try to trace the expressivist revolution (in Part IV), which I see as building on the two changes just described: developing a conception of the power of the creative imagination out of the first, and an understanding of Nature as a source out of the second. The goal of self-exploration now extends to the ideal of authenticity, against the background of the Herderian idea that each individual (and also each people) has his/her own way of being human, and must be true to this original mode.

In the last part, I try to read various passages of nineteenth and twentieth century culture in the light of these connected strands. In a short concluding chapter, I then trace some of the issues before modern Western society which this portrait allows us to come to grips with.