

Strong Evaluations and Personal Identity

Arto Laitinen, Jyväskylä

1. Strong evaluations

Charles Taylor (1985a, 15-45; 1989, 25-52) draws a distinction between weak and strong evaluations. They are two kinds of evaluative attitudes persons can have towards a variety of objects of evaluation. The possible objects can vary from individual desires, emotions and acts to whole ways of life. Strong evaluations are stable preferences based on *qualitative distinctions* concerning the *worth* of the options. Strong evaluations are responses to the non-instrumental value of the options, and they can be mistaken, because the value of the options is not based on the response. By contrast, what Taylor calls "weak evaluations" cannot be mistaken. Weak evaluations make any of their objects weakly valued. This means that strong evaluations are value-based, and weak evaluations desire-based preferences. Taylor also says that strong evaluations, unlike weak evaluations, are central to one's identity. One's identity is constituted through a *strong adherence*, a strong identification with and commitment to the values. Thus strong evaluations are stable preferences that are strongly adhered to, and which are based on strong values.

Both "strong" and "evaluation" are potentially misleading terms. "Strength" does not refer to motivational strength: I can have very strong desires which I disapprove of. Values are "strong" in Taylor's sense if they are important, and the motivational strength derives from their importance to one's identity. Taylor (1994, 249) has also commented that the term "evaluation" is not an entirely happy one, because it might suggest that the value in question is dependent on the evaluations, or that the valuing must be reflective. It is also important that contrary to the suggestion of some commentators, like Owen Flanagan (1996), the value in question need not be *moral* value, but it can be prudential or existential, aesthetic or "spiritual" (Taylor 1985a, 24). There is a broad spectrum of values which can be central to one's identity. Strong evaluations can be implicit or explicit, more or less articulate and more or less reflective.

Taylor's notion of weak evaluations seems to be a mixed bag. As we saw, in his definition, weak evaluations are desire-based preferences. Yet Taylor's examples of weak evaluations are best seen as value-based preferences, but ones which are of *small value* and not central to one's identity. Here the inflationary way that Joseph Raz (1999) uses the notion "value" is helpful in that it includes also what he calls "small values". These are not based on desires, but it would be odd to call them "strong" values either. Using Raz's notion of value, we can see that Taylor's (1985a, 17) examples of weak evaluations, namely "exhilarating holiday in the north" and "relaxing holiday in the south" in fact embody values. The value of exhilaration or relaxation is not dependent on one's taking them to be valuable. It is intelligible to choose either option, they are both eligible, whereas it would not be intelligible to spend the two weeks in the nearby wasteland wiggling one's toes in the mud. It has *no* value in it, and is an unintelligible option, and it would make no sense to desire it (Taylor 1991, 36). Thus, it seems that strong evaluations differ in degree from preferences based on "small" values, and they differ in kind from preferences based on desires.

To sum up, strong evaluations are stable preferences which are strongly identified with and which are based on important values as opposed to small values and as opposed to desire-based preferences.

2. The senses of "personal identity"

How should we assess Taylor's claim that personal identity is a matter of strong evaluations?

"Personal identity" can be discussed in many senses. First of all, the question of personal identity can refer to criteria of personhood i.e. the question of what features make something a person. The classical answers are that a person is a rational animal, a linguistic animal, a moral agent or a self-conscious being. We can say that the question in this sense concerns the universal "*species-identity*" of persons, not an individual's self-identity. When Taylor says that strong evaluations are central to one's identity he does *not* mean species-identity in this sense. Yet, it may be noted that one aspect of Taylor's answer to the question of criteria of personhood is that persons are actual or potential strong evaluators.

Secondly, identity can refer to the logical relation of sameness, or as Paul Ricoeur (1992) has called it, "*idem-identity*". Identity can refer to diachronic persistence in time, i.e. numerical sameness of an object at two different points of time. Or, identity can refer to the synchronous unity of an object at one point of time. Or again, identity can refer to the exact similarity of two numerically distinct objects. In this sense of "*idem-identity*", strong evaluations are not of help, and Taylor does not really discuss the problem at all. Taylor's analysis presupposes that issues concerning *idem-identity* are already settled. Most importantly, he does not suggest that if two people have exactly similar evaluative views, then they are the same person.

Finally, "personal identity" can refer to identity in the sense of *selfhood*, or as Ricoeur calls it, "*ipse-identity*". Human beings are self-interpreting animals, or "identity-forming animals", who have practical orientations and who can suffer from identity crises (Taylor 1985a, 15-76; 1989, 25-52). Everyone has their own subjective perspective and their own life to lead, and they pose and answer questions like "Who am I really? When am I really myself?"

Being a person or a self is an active business. Having a self in a full-fledged sense means having a conception of oneself, and having conceptions is an active business. People do not have beliefs like things have properties. As Sellars (1963) has stressed, the relation of two mental episodes has to be normative if it is to count as knowledge; it cannot be merely causal. And as the "transcendental tradition" from Kant onwards has stressed, being a subject is not merely a matter of having mental contents (which could possibly be caused by the world) but being aware of the reality, taking the mental contents to be *about* the world. In addition to normativity and intentionality, the activity of self-defining is one aspect of the spontaneity of the subject. One's self-identity does not rest simply on "having features", but on one's activity, on identification with some actual or possible features. In this sense, everyone's identity is self-made. Cultural and social

mediations are of course intertwined in this self-definition, and the point in stressing the self-made nature of self-identity is not directed against these social and cultural mediations, but against the view that one's identity is a matter of given, natural features. Self-identity is a tentative result of an ongoing process of self-interpretation.

We can distinguish between a narrower and a broader notion of self-identity. First, Taylor (1989, 25-52; 1997) stresses that what we want to know when we ask "who am I" is our orientation in life. What kind of person do I want to be, what kind of goals do I have in life, what kind of things matter to me, towards what kind of things I want to have a developed sensibility? In an identity crisis, says Taylor, we need to fix the "moral map" by which we navigate our lives - we want to know where to go from here. "Practical identity" is an orientation concept. It is this "practical identity" which is wholly constituted by one's strong evaluations, by the important values that one has strong adherence to.

But there seems to be another, more comprehensive notion of self-identity, which includes more than one's orientation in life. It covers among other things one's success in living up to one's goals, and any of one's features that one identifies with. This broader notion is related to a metaphor of self-image and it includes all aspects of the self-definitions, not merely the practical ones. Often Taylor talks as if everything related to personal identity would be a matter of practical orientation. Yet some of Taylor's discussions of self-identity in fact concern this broader notion, but he has not distinguished it from what I call here practical identity (see Taylor 1991, 31-53; 1985b, 221-5, 1989, 43-52). I call this broader notion one's "self-interpretation" or "self-definition". Self-definition consists of one's *identifications with* one's actual or possible *features*. It is important that not all the features that one actually has are constitutive of one's identity. The central concept here is "identification with" (Frankfurt 1988, Taylor 1985b, 221; Ricoeur 1992). The paradigm example is addiction: I cannot help having these desires, but yet I do not identify with them, they are not really "mine". The same process of identification is possible in relation to any of my features. The function of strong evaluations in this process deserves a closer look.

3. The role of strong evaluations in self-definitions

Strong evaluations have a double role in one's self-interpretations. In addition to the direct role they have in constituting one's practical identity, strong evaluations provide the framework in the light of which other features are evaluated, and possibly identified with or disowned.

Identification does not start from scratch, it always presupposes something given that I identify with. What are these other features? We can distinguish different ways of having a feature: "first nature", value-identifications, habitual "second nature", voluntary effort and social attribution.

First, as embodied beings, we have some biological characteristics that are given in birth. These are not merely linked to our physical features but also our mental capacities. Also events after our birth can affect our natural features, our first nature: one can lose one's sight in a traffic accident, for example. These natural features are optional raw-material for one's identity.

Secondly, at the core of our self-identity is our practical identity, our identifications with culturally mediated values and goals. As we saw, these acquired

identifications play a double role in our self-definitions: indirectly our value-horizons mediate our other identifications-with. It depends on our value-identifications, which aspects of our first nature, experiences or habits we identify with and which not. But my value-identifications affect also directly the kind of person I am: there is an aspect of identity, which directly consists of value-orientations. We can call this aspect also the "ideal self", which consists of the ideal values and goals that I would wish to be able to live by. There is an element of imagination here, the goals and features that I include in my ideal self need not be something that are already I am, they are appropriated from the surrounding world.

Thirdly, persons have a second nature, a character consisting of acquired dispositions. What we do and learn by doing affects the kinds of dispositions and habits we have. Our "second nature" is different from what we were at birth, and what we would like to be, but nevertheless, this is what we have become. Theorizing one's self-identity more narrowly in terms of one's value-orientations only loses this dynamic aspect of identity-formation.

Fourth, one's habitual second nature, once formed, does not require much attention and voluntary striving. But some features belong to me through *voluntary effort*. Paul Ricoeur (1992) illustrates this with keeping one's word: when the time comes to keep one's word, I may have lost all the inclination to do it, but yet I may voluntarily stick to my word.

Finally, some features belong to me merely through attributions from others. "Being famous" or "being out of fashion" may be things that I have not striven to be or even paid any attention to. I may be aware of such socially attributed labels without identifying with them. The influence of these social attributions to one's self-image is at the basis of much discussion concerning recognition.

All these features, one's first and second nature, one's ideal self, one's voluntary strivings and one's social appearance are raw-material for identity, they are something I can identify with. Through these identifications, something that is merely a given part of first nature, second nature, voluntary effort or social attribution is transformed into my identity. There is a process of selection as to which features are *significant* enough to belong to my identity. The significant features are either positively identified with or negatively "disowned". This process of identification implicitly relies on the framework of strong evaluations: if I value, say, courage and see myself as courageous, I may identify with some of my aggressive impulses, but if not, I may see these impulses as a feature that is not genuinely "mine".

Thus, to sum up, strong evaluations are stable preferences which are strongly adhered to and which are based on important values. The role that they have in one's self-identity depends on whether we talk about *practical identity* or *self-definitions* in the more encompassing sense. Practical identity is entirely constituted by one's strong evaluations. In self-definitions strong evaluations play a double role: they are directly a constituent of one's self-definitions, and indirectly they provide the value horizon in the light of which one's other features, (natural, acquired and socially attributed) are evaluated and either identified with or disowned.

References

- Flanagan, O. 1996 *Self-Expressions: Mind, Morals and Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frankfurt, H. 1988 *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raz, J. 1999 *Engaging Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1992 *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 2000 *The Just*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sellars, W. 1963 *Science, Perception and Reality*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Taylor, C. 1985a *Philosophical Papers 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1985b *Philosophical Papers 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1989 *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1991 *Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1994 "Reply and Re-articulation" in James Tully (ed.): *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1995 *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. 1997 "Leading a Life", in Ruth Chang (ed.), *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reasoning*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 170-83.