

## B O O K R E V I E W S

THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF RICHARD TAYLOR*Paul B. Cliteur*

**RESTORING PRIDE: THE LOST VIRTUE OF OUR AGE, BY RICHARD TAYLOR,**  
(PROMETHEUS BOOKS, 1996, ISBN 157392024X), 232 pp., \$24.95 CLOTH

The first thing I read from Richard Taylor was an article on the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, to be found in D. J. O'Connors *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> I was immediately struck by Taylor's style, his tone of voice, and his clarity. In short, this was a philosopher in his own right. Later I learned that Taylor is much indebted to Schopenhauer's philosophy.<sup>2</sup> This appears already from his early work, a very elegant treatise, *Metaphysics* (1964), but it also manifests itself in *Action and Purpose* (1966),<sup>3</sup> *Good and Evil* (1970), *Freedom, Anarchy and the Law* (1973, 1982),<sup>4</sup> *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (1985),<sup>5</sup> and *Reflective Wisdom* (1989),<sup>6</sup> an anthology of Taylor's work.

Schopenhauer did not consider reason to be primordial, but will. He was a voluntarist, not a rationalist. He scorned Hegel and the German idealists of his time as being unfaithful followers of Kant. But Schopenhauer himself was in a certain sense critical towards Kant as well. He thought Kant's doctrine of the unknowable thing-in-itself unacceptable, and was convinced that he had discovered what ultimate reality is: will. This "will" should not be confused with individual will. The will of Schopenhauer is a blind striving; the source and basis of all there is.

In a certain sense Taylor develops the theory of Schopenhauer with his own modifications. Taylor does not underscore the life-denying tendency of Schopenhauer's philosophy that led him to introduce Buddhism and

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*Paul B. Cliteur is Professor of Philosophy at Technical University Delft and former chairman of the Dutch Humanist League.*

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Hinduism into Western philosophy. Taylor is more positive or "optimistic" than Schopenhauer. But he was always faithful to Schopenhauer's thesis that will and not reason is primordial, especially in *Good and Evil*,<sup>7</sup> but also in his other works. In particular Taylor clarified Schopenhauer's ethics as expounded in *The Basis of Morality*,<sup>8</sup> characterized by Taylor as "one of his most original and inspiring writings." In *Good and Evil* Taylor also presents a devastating criticism on Kantian rationalism with its orientation on rules and duty as the cornerstones of ethics, supplanting this with a more naturalistic approach to ethical problems with compassion as a supreme moral value.

In his eulogy on Schopenhauer, Taylor writes: No significant aspect of experience escaped his interpretation, and things ordinarily deemed beneath the notice of philosophy—such as noise, sex, and the anatomy of animals—fall into place in his system."<sup>9</sup> The same applies to Taylor. Like Schopenhauer's, his philosophy is also worldly wisdom. He is also much preoccupied with rather uncommon subjects for philosophers, such as love and even more unusually with sex.

The theme of *Restoring Pride* (1996), the book that is under review here, is a continuation of *Ethics, Faith, and Reason*. Taylor advocates a reorientation in ethics in the sense of a complete conversion of the traditional moral convictions. He rejects the egalitarian leanings of modern morality and hopes to restore the approach of the ancient Greek philosophers.<sup>10</sup> We have lost contact with the old value of individual excellence. "We seem almost ashamed to admit that personal worth is, to its possessor, incomparably the most important thing on earth."<sup>11</sup> Taylor wants to restore this value. He suggests to label this value "virtue." Virtue to the ancients meant personal excellence or individual strength or superiority. Thus, a virtuous man was not one who merely fits in with or accommodates himself to others, but, on the contrary, someone who stands out as superior to others.<sup>12</sup> The ethics of virtue has to be contrasted with the ethics of duty as advocated by Kant and almost all modern philosophers.

## RESTORING PRIDE

In *Restoring Pride* Taylor elaborates on his earlier meditations on virtue, ethics, and humanity. He asks what is characteristic for men and women of great creative achievement. The answer is that these people invent their own lives, while others fall into the lock step of custom. The latter approach to life he calls "willing slavery."<sup>13</sup>

Taylor's last glorification of great men and women is, again, much inspired by the Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean celebration of great men. He seems to ask for the transvaluation of all values, and for aristocratic values. The latter element makes *Restoring Pride* an "un-American" book, so it seems. And Taylor, like Nietzsche, seems to be aware of the "untimely character" of his meditations. The beginning of the book is to the point. Following the example of Schopenhauer's habit to write provocative and even offensive

forewords for his works, the author tells us that the ideas that unfold in the pages of his book will be greeted by many with shock as being "elitist." Those people are perfectly right. "Let it be made clear at the outset," Taylor writes, "that these ideas *are* elitist." He does not attempt to be politically correct, or to defend any popular ideology. Some people are wiser, more creative, more resourceful, and, in general, more competent in some or many of the ways that count in the world. And the corollary of this is that some people are foolish, uncreative, unresourceful, and incompetent in some or even all of the ways that count in the world.<sup>14</sup> Now, the good are entitled to take pride in themselves, for pride is the justified love of oneself.<sup>15</sup>

Again, this whole manner of stating the problem is reminiscent of Schopenhauer and also of Nietzsche. Schopenhauer called ordinary people "factory work of nature" and the proclamation of the superman by Schopenhauer's most well-known pupil Nietzsche is a further development of his teacher's scorn for inferior people. It reminds us also of Calicles and of Thrasymachus in Plato's dialogues. The slaves do not want to call their inferiority by name.

But Taylor's proclamation of pagan values and individual excellence is more mellow, even "Christian" one is tempted to say. Taylor insists on distinguishing real pride from the associations we have with the word. A proud man, he writes, has no need to dominate. He welcomes corrections. He cares little about the approval of others. He is soft-spoken and does not call attention to himself.<sup>16</sup>

But these are not regarded as Christian values by Taylor. He speaks as a humanist when he calls the Greeks "the true fathers of our secular and scientific culture."<sup>17</sup> The corruption began when the religious culture born in the Middle East began to overwhelm the heritage of the Greeks. Pride came to be, in the teachings of Christians, the first of the seven deadly sins.<sup>18</sup>

Genuine pride is a lost virtue, *lost*, because it was clearly understood by our cultural ancestors, the pagan Greeks. Judeo-Christian culture, on the other hand, regarded pride as a sin, an arrogant attempt to be godlike.<sup>19</sup> With the advent and spread of Christianity, the notion of personal excellence was virtually lost. Human goodness came to be defined in terms of how one treats *others*, not in terms of what one does with *oneself*.<sup>20</sup> Taylor wants to restore real pride and the ethics of individual excellence. "You are not a person just by virtue of having two arms and two legs and an upright stature, or whatever else distinguishes you biologically from other creatures. There is no uniquely human worth in these. Your worth as a person lies within you and, unless you treasure it and cultivate it, it dies, and with it, whatever worth you ever had."<sup>21</sup>

## EGALITARIANISM IN TAYLOR: THE CREATION OF ONE'S OWN LIFE

As I said, this is not the aggressive paganism of Nietzsche. In *Restoring Pride* Taylor stresses in a certain sense the positive, even the egalitarian aspects, of

his philosophy. *Pace* his emphasis on the need of every individual to strive for the best, there is one creative pursuit that is open to anyone possessed of imagination, intelligence, courage, and a correct conception of what life is all about. "That pursuit is the creation of a life—one's *own* life."<sup>22</sup> Taylor stresses that everybody has the power to do something that few others, and possibly no one else, can do. It may be something that will leave a mark on the world and make the name of that person known for generations. It may also be something that is more or less unnoticed by the rest of the world. "That does not matter. It will be noticed by *you*, and you are the only person on earth who needs to be impressed."<sup>23</sup>

So in his last book Taylor admonishes people to strive for the best. You can make something of yourself, or, if you lack the courage to be different, you can recline "on the soft and comfortable bed of inherited custom and convention."<sup>24</sup>

This "egalitarian" faith in the uniqueness of seemingly very common people sounds almost Christian. Does the great aristocratic pagan Richard Taylor succumb to the charms of the slave morality of Christianity in the eve of his life? I may be mistaken, but the tone of his writings seems to be mellowed. Taylor almost sounds "egalitarian" when he writes: "The great men and women of history are judged by their impact—battles are won, books that altered the course of things, inventions, and so on. But personal greatness is something quite different from this and often forgotten, or indeed never known to any except its possessor."<sup>25</sup>

### TAYLOR AS A HUMANIST

Readers of *Philo* will take a special interest in Taylor's remarks on humanism. In his foreword to *Reflective Wisdom* Taylor characterizes his own position as "humanist."<sup>26</sup> Taylor is a peculiar humanist, however, because he combines his humanist stance with adherence to what he calls a kind of "theism." He even speaks of a "theism that dwells so comfortably within my humanist philosophy" and contrasts his own position with other humanists that adhere to atheism as integral part of their humanist position.<sup>27</sup> According to Taylor, there is no necessary connection between humanism and atheism. To substantiate his thesis he refers to Spinoza—the father of biblical criticism and an outcast from established religion—who considered nonetheless God's existence a certainty. He also mentions Socrates who was disdainful of the pious pretensions of his contemporaries such as Euthyphro and Anytus, and who nevertheless had no doubts of the existence of the gods. William James, the leading enemy of absolutisms of every kind, also had a strong affinity to the religious temperament, Taylor writes. And finally J. S. Mill, the greatest defender of liberty in the history of philosophy, whose utilitarianism anticipated the situation ethics of most contemporary humanists, was also a theist, though a tepid one.

About his "own belief in God" Taylor writes that, without it, he would

"feel inwardly impoverished." His belief in God "springs from an awareness of the profound mystery of nature and of life." He adheres to no church, affirms no creed, and he abominates organized religious practice. These things represent the corruption of a religious outlook, he tells us.

From this it appears that Taylor is certainly *not* a theist. "Theism" is a theological construction. It presupposes a creed and a church that makes authoritative pronouncements about the content of the concept "God." Jack Donnelly—who wrote an introduction to one of Taylor's books—considers Taylor to be a "a fideist with decided pantheistic proclivities." Taylor's religiosity is "rather idiosyncratic," he writes. An appropriate qualification, I think.

But Taylor's idiosyncratic use of concepts like "theism" and "humanism" needs not concern us here. More important is that *Restoring Pride* is another book of a great writer. All of the virtues of Taylor's work are manifested here: a forceful style, convincing analysis, excellent examples, and real wisdom. What distinguishes *Restoring Pride* from other works by Taylor is that his last book has a popular style. It can be read by nonphilosophers as well. Like Schopenhauer in his old age, he popularizes philosophy that makes it even more readable than many literary works.

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