

***THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION AND THE MASTER
STATE:
TAYLOR AND DE KONINCK ON THE CANADIAN
FEDERATION***

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1. Introduction

In this paper I want to compare and contrast the views of two Quebec authors—Charles de Koninck and Charles Taylor—on Quebec nationalism and Canadian federalism. Taylor’s present popularity does not need comment. While he has been overlooked by contemporary mainstream philosophers, De Koninck enjoyed a considerable reputation in an earlier era. I will argue that he provides a valuable insight into the politics of nationalism which has been overlooked both in political practice and in the academic literature.

Both Taylor and de Koninck are Quebec nationalists and federalists. If, however, they espouse similar political views, they offer different readings of the issues. Taylor cites authors like Hegel, Rousseau, Herder and Montesquieu and, in line with a Continental tradition, avoids metaphysics. He is a member of the new Quebec, a self-consciously secular society which embraced a powerful new nationalism in the wake of *la Révolution Tranquille*.

De Koninck, on the other hand, is a neo-Thomist and a robust Aristotelian. He does not shy away from metaphysics. Unlike Taylor, he was not a native Quebecker, but came over to the University of Laval as a professional philosopher from the University of Louvain in Belgium. If he uses the philosophical vocabulary of an earlier era, his thought deserves a larger audience.

I will first consider Taylor’s position, then de Koninck’s, then compare and evaluate the two. Although both authors espouse a similar notion of community, I will argue that de Koninck’s Neo-Aristotelianism resolves serious problems present in Taylor’s scheme.

2. Taylor

Taylor's views about Quebec are based on an implicit communitarianism and a dialogical notion of the self. Taylor's political thought emphasizes community in a way that is difficult to reconcile with any kind of "atomic liberalism." In an essay on the Quebec question, he expands the notion of liberalism to include this community-based perspective.

Taylor begins by distinguishing between "procedural" and "substantive" liberalism. He associates procedural liberalism with American authors like John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Bruce Ackerman. On this procedural view, society is an aggregate of distinct and separate persons. Citizens are self-determining atoms. They do not share the same ethnicity, the same religious persuasion, the same moral or metaphysical views. They are not united around any shared vision of the good life, but "around a strong procedural commitment to treat people with equal respect."¹ The emphasis is not on the maintenance of any kind of substantive consensus, but on the operation of an efficient juridical apparatus which safeguards equality and protects individual freedoms. Taylor sees Trudeau's new Canadian constitution with its Charter of Rights as an extension of this kind of procedural liberalism.

Taylor insists that "a society with strong collective goals can be liberal."² He criticizes procedural liberalism and opts for a "substantive" model of liberalism, one that allows for some shared notion of the good. Taylor points to French Quebec as an example. For people within the francophone province, there are two objectives, 1) the maintenance of a liberal system with individual freedoms and respect for minorities and 2) "the survival and flourishing of French culture." Taylor writes: "There will undoubtedly be tensions and difficulties in pursuing these objectives together, but such a pursuit is not impossible, and the problems are not in principle greater than those encountered by any liberal society that has to combine, for example, liberty and equality, or prosperity and justice."³

Substantive liberalism safeguards fundamental individual and minority rights while espousing some collective notion of the good. Taylor traces the genealogy of this model of liberalism through a civic-humanist tradition that includes authors like Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Hegel. On this view, one lives, not as an isolated individual, but, first and foremost, as a member of a community, a *polis*. The ultimate political problem is not: How can we escape the State of Nature? but: How can we find a way to live the good life in solidarity with a group of our peers. Political freedom is the ability to decide and control one's destiny through active involvement in a participatory political regime. Patriotism plays an important role. It is, in Montesquieu's words, a "*Vertu*,"

¹ Taylor, "Politics," p. 245.

² Taylor, "Politics," p. 247.

³ Taylor, "Politics," p. 247.

something which helps us transcend our natural selfishness embrace the good of the community as a whole.⁴

Liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism, tends to defend the notion of individual rights. Taylor, however, in invoking a substantive account of liberalism, is able to advocate restrictions on individual rights for the sake of a collective good. If Taylor believes that there are fundamental rights which can never be violated such as the right to life, liberty, due process, free speech, and the free practice of religion, he also believes that there are less fundamental rights which may be abrogated for the sake of a communal good. In Taylor's words:

One has to distinguish between the fundamental liberties, those that should never be infringed and therefore ought to be unassailably entrenched, from privileges and immunities that are important but can be revoked or restricted for reasons of public policy—although one would need a strong reason to do this.⁵

Taylor condones, for example, restrictions on the use of English language on commercial signs in Quebec. Because the right to use a particular language on commercial signs is not a fundamental right, it can be restricted for the sake of a collective good which Taylor interprets as the flourishing of francophone culture.

If Taylor emphasizes the importance of community, this is, in part, because of an epistemology of self-identity which is based on the socialization of the individual. Taylor proposes a “dialogical” notion of the self. Individual human beings are, first and foremost, social beings. Relationships are “the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation.”⁶ “We define our identity always in dialogue.”⁷ It follows that an absence of respect or recognition for our own particular uniqueness may undermine our self-esteem. In Taylor's words:

A person or a group can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people and the society around them mirror back a confining or a demeaning or a contemptible view of themselves. Nonrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.⁸

For Taylor, federalism plays a twofold role. On the one hand, it preserves the identity of the individual communities, and secondly, it is a mechanism that permits the public recognition of underprivileged groups like the French minority in Canadian society. Politically, he supports some sort of special status for Quebec, interpreting the failure of the Meech Lake Accord with its “distinct society” provision for Quebec as an overt rejection by English Canada of both substantive liberalism and the politics of recognition. English Canada has 1)

⁴ “*Une préférence continue de l'intérêt public au sien propre.*” Taylor, “Liberal-Communitarian Debate,” p. 187.

⁵ Taylor, “Politics,” p. 247.

⁶ Taylor, “Politics,” p. 232.

⁷ Taylor, “Politics,” p. 230.

⁸ Taylor, “Politics,” p. 225.

imposed a procedural model of liberalism on Quebec and 2) withheld due recognition and respect for Quebec's francophone uniqueness. If many Canadians would strongly disagree with this kind of analysis, Taylor remains a steadfast federalist, one who argues for a decentralized federal government and a form of provincial autonomy which would give Quebec the freedom to create and preserve its own French identity.

3. De Koninck

De Koninck, like Taylor, adopts a communitarian point of view. But his communitarianism finds its origins, not in later Continental thinkers, but in Aristotle. Taylor is preoccupied with the politics of self-identity; de Koninck is worried about virtue. A vibrant sense of community is important because it permits human flourishing, but human flourishing has an indispensable moral component. In de Koninck's words: "Honest and virtuous actions are, in principle, the aim of political society."⁹

De Koninck attacks "procedural liberalism" in the vernacular of an earlier era. He would have had little patience for the libertarian emphasis on negative liberty proposed by contemporary liberal authors like Nozick, Rawls, Gauthier, or Narveson. Laws that do nothing but protect negative liberty are like the iron bars that separate wild animals from one another in a zoo. Such laws procure a certain good, but not, properly speaking, a human good. People who avoid harming one another do not constitute a true community. A community presupposes a meeting of minds, a true union of wills. To be a member of a community is to be part of a *collective* pursuit of the good.

If Taylor believes that Quebec needs political power in order to preserve its self-identity, de Koninck elaborates a metaphysics of particularity. Patriotism, civic pride, love for one's homeland is a natural good. Why? Because one is obliged to love oneself and selfhood begins with one's country. One's homeland is an extension of one's family and deserves to be loved accordingly. De Koninck warns about excessive nationalism "that claims the allegiance of the entire man." If, however, "human life does not consist of a return to the initial principles of life, but a striving towards a rational good,"¹⁰ loving one's extended family, one's homeland, is a natural virtue.

If de Koninck was philosophically known for his sallies against the Personalists, he argues that political analysis must take into account human particularity. We are not disembodied, abstract realities. We do not exist detached from the specific, contingent details of history. We have a biological, a physical

⁹ De Koninck, *La Confédération*, p. 9. "Il faut donc admettre en principe que les actions honnêtes et vertueuses sont le but de la société politique et non pas la seule vie en commun."

¹⁰ De Koninck, p. 2. "La vie de l'homme ne consiste pas dans un retour aux principes initiaux de son être, mais à tendre vers une fin qui est le bien de sa nature raisonnable."

link to specific people: our parents, grandparents, our brothers, sisters, neighbours, teachers, etc. Human self-realization must begin here, in this specific context, in our relationship to these people.

In arguing for Canadian federalism in the early 1950s, de Koninck attacks the concept of a “Master State.” His 1954 report for the Quebec government’s Royal Commission Inquiry on Constitutional Problems is entitled: *La confédération, rempart contre le grand état*, which might be translated as: *Confederation, Bulwark Against the Master State*. In this report, de Koninck identifies two political evils. Both are embodied in a different conception of the Master State. He argues that Canadian federalism is a worthy option because it protects against the establishment of this kind of state.

We might call the first kind of political regime: Master State T (for totalitarianism). De Koninck (like Karl Popper) identifies Marx and Plato as the two great apologists of this kind of authoritarian regime. Both propose anonymous, abstract, generalized political regimes which ignore and deny the particularity of human nature. In Plato’s *Republic*, the state apparatus conceals and effectively destroys the natural link which should exist between family members. Marx’s theory of “liberation” proposes a similar deconstruction of human individuality in favour of mass ideology. In each case, one is left with a faceless, bureaucratic, totalitarian regime which forces its subjects to conform, defies its own political power, stifles individuality, undermines the family and destroys real difference. De Koninck’s associates this kind of Master State with communism.

If, however, de Koninck criticizes Marxist socialism, he also criticizes the adepts of free enterprise who pervert the political enterprise in another way. Call the type of political regime they propose: Master State C (for consumerism). Master State C provides a more subtle type of social control. De Koninck writes:

It is not only with Marx that the abdication of politics began, nor the observation that men, for the most part—in abundance as well as in privation—seek after material goods in an uncontrolled manner. The novelty is that intellectuals have discovered, in this unconstrained appetite, this principle of human action, a social force, which had only been exploited, from time to time, by tyrants, rulers with bad reputations. Now, lo and behold, they have appreciated the fact that the statistical, calculable, predictable character of the behaviour of the masses allows one to use this principle of human action in a scientific manner.¹¹

¹¹ “Ce n’est donc pas avec Karl Marx qu’a commencé l’abdication du politique, ni la constatation que les hommes, pour la plus part—ceux qui possèdent en abondance comme ceux qui en sont privés—poursuivent les biens sensibles d’une manière déréglée. Le nouveau, c’est que les intellectuels ont vu, dans cet appétit déréglée, dans cette constante de l’action humaine, une force sociale, qui n’avait encore été exploitée, de temps à autre, que par des tyrans, c’est-à-dire, nommément, des personnages mal vus. Mais voici qu’on s’aperçut que le caractère statistique, calculable, prévisible, du comportement de la mass des hommes permet d’en user

In the totalitarian state, social control is explicit and unforgiving. The army and police are elements of repression. In the consumer-state oppression is (as authors like Tocqueville, Ortega, Lecky, Burnham and others) more insidious. Advertising is used to create superfluous, infinite needs of consummation. No attempt is spared in the effort to awaken ever new appetites. The forces of marketing manipulate individuals, making them conform to a consumer ideal. Politics, understood as a rational extension of our particular human nature, is set aside, for a life of thoughtless gratification.

For de Koninck, both types of Master States represent an ultimate betrayal. In the former case, we have a life of ideological conformity with an artificial, demeaning theoretical ideal. In the latter case, we have life ordered according to appetites rather than reason. In former case, we have an centralized and anonymous ruling structure that crushes individuality of any sort. In the latter case, we have rule by fashion and advertising, the surreptitious use of sexuality and techniques of persuasion to control public opinion and behaviour.

De Koninck argues that totalitarianism ignores man's origins, whereas consumer society ignores his end. In both cases, politics becomes a generic, quantitative science. One manages the masses by force or by persuasion. One enforces some kind of mindless political loyalty, by brute physical force or by slick techniques of salesmanship. In either case, we confront a political reductionism which denies the concrete richness of individuals or groups, a political regime that overlooks or overrides historical and geographical origins, ignoring family ties, religious practices, social customs, individual eccentricity and natural virtue.

De Koninck's criticism of the Master State could be summarized in the form of a table:

TWO TYPES OF MASTER STATES

type of regime	proponents	social problem	individual problem	metaphysical problem
T= totalitarianism	Marx, Plato	impersonal bureaucracy	mindless conformity	turns man away from his origins
C=consumerism	champions of free enterprise	consumerism	appetites over reason	turns man away from his final end

If Heidegger argued that Communism and Americanism are metaphysically the same, de Koninck sees them as complementary extremisms with similarly tragic results. I will argue that his insights provide a timely reminder of what has been

forgotten in contemporary Canadian political philosophy and resolves deep problems one finds in Taylor's thinking.

4. Comparison and Evaluation

Within the framework of Canadian federalism, Taylor argues for 1) substantive liberalism and 2) a politics of recognition. If his account of substantive liberalism is a valuable restatement of an earlier view found in de Koninck, his preoccupation with the politics of recognition is philosophically and politically problematic. De Koninck provides a useful alternative to such notions.

Taylor and de Koninck both argue that the purpose of the Canadian federation is not the centralization of powers and the leveling of regional differences, but the preservation of what is unique in each of its constituent peoples. Each argues that there is a unique "national" culture of Quebec which should be preserved. This notion of Quebec nationhood may or may not be consistent with some larger notion of a Canadian people. But whether we agree or not with the Quebec nationalist position, de Koninck provides a more substantial notion of cultural self-identity.

On Taylor's view, self-identity is fundamentally epistemological in character. Our own identity is defined by our *knowledge* of what we are. This is why it is so very important that we construct an appropriate image of ourselves. Without self-knowledge, we have lost our identity. We are, in effect, non-existent. Taylor argues that self-knowledge derives, in large part, from the society that surrounds us. It is a social construction. This is to elaborate, however, a very tenuous account of self-identity. If we want to elaborate a more robust account, we need a metaphysics of particularity that goes beyond mere epistemology and anchors itself in the existent. De Koninck, following in the footsteps of Aristotle, provides the foundation for such a theory.

On de Koninck's account, self-identity is not a matter of social construction. We do not have to construct a self-identity. We already have one. That is to say, we already have a nature. We are human beings, family members, citizens of a particular community, members of a church. We inhabit a particular environment. We exist at a certain point in history. We share beliefs, jokes, aspirations. We may not fully comprehend the significance of our own nature, but it is already there, awaiting investigation.

Taylor, on the other hand, provides no metaphysical basis for self-knowledge. This leaves us peculiarly vulnerable to the erroneous beliefs and attitudes of other people, especially in a globalized world. If all we are as individuals is what other people think we are, we will not be able to escape the demeaning stereotypes society projects on us. But it does not follow, that because other people think we are unworthy, unequal or inferior that we are unworthy, unequal or inferior. As de Koninck suggests, our self-identity has a solid grounding in the specifics of our own existence. It is not something we have to achieve. It is already present in our

relations with parents, families, friends and neighbours, in our social traditions and customs, in our relationship to a particular natural environment, in our religion, our history and so on. This is what tells us what we are, not public opinion.

Someone on the other side of the modernist divide might argue that traditions, customs, family relations, religions, and public accounts of history can no longer serve this kind of purpose. Nietzsche declared that God was dead. Just so, one might claim that these old-fashioned commitments are dead. They have been killed off by the pervasive and ever-sceptical forces of modernity. But de Koninck is an Aristotelean. He situates our identity in practical life. And practical life has not changed as much as modernists would like us to think. If popular philosophical systems render self-identity problematic, it is because they obscure the fact that we are, as always, human beings, with an identifiable nature that expresses itself in the particularity of a specific body, a specific family, a specific community, a specific history, a specific language, and so on.

Because Taylor's account makes us crucially dependent on the recognition others accord us, it places the responsibility for our own thriving outside ourselves. This vitiates any vigorous sense of cultural identity. If Quebec nationalists vehemently complain about a lack of public recognition of Quebec's unique French status, as de Koninck's analysis suggests, such recognition is not decisive. It is not English-Canadians but Quebeckers themselves, the realities of their existence and their own decision-making, which will determine the future of Quebec's cultural identity. The powers of technology and empire may, as George Grant suggests, undercut any striving towards a distinct French identity. But it is Quebeckers' response to modernity that will determine the province's history.

Taylor claims that English Canada has failed to recognize Quebec's unique status as the French partner in Confederation. But English Canadians accept, more than ever, the notion of regional difference. They insist, however, that there are other groups—natives, the Métis, Newfoundlanders, the inhabitants of the four Western provinces, Acadians—who may also deserve some sort of special political recognition. The way around this political impasse is to simply move on with the business of governing, responding to specific legislative and economic needs while recognizing that the politics of recognition is of secondary importance. Taylor's view seems to require immediate public acts of recognition. But these acts depend on a far-reaching consensus that is, on any issue, difficult to achieve. It is unrealistic to demand or expect immediate change.

Taylor's account of self-identity is problematic in another way. On Taylor's epistemological view, we are what we *know* ourselves to be. Self-identity becomes an epistemological achievement. It can only be achieved through the deliberate pursuit of self-knowledge. But the pursuit of self-knowledge may breed an unhealthy self-absorption, a distrust of difference, and an unwillingness

to accept what is good in others. Modern authors from Tom Wolfe to Christopher Lash to Gilles Lipovestky to Robert Bellah have complained about the narcissism implicit in the contemporary cult of self-identity. And the same inward logic of introspection and self-absorption may operate on a cultural, an ethnic, or an national scale. In a healthy society, we must recognize that a self-conscious preoccupation with self-identity may become a wall or a barrier that prevents us from appreciating and learning from others. Ethnic, linguistic or regional difference is not, in and of itself, problematic. It is that a Taylor-like notion of self-identity may spawn an exaggerated search for self-knowledge that turns us inwards and away from others.

As modern history makes plain, nationalism can be the source of serious discord, of great intolerance and violence. Taylor's analysis, with its heavy emphasis on the pursuit of self-identity, offers little resistance to these evils. De Koninck, on the other hand, believes that politics has a moral end. It follows that political actions directed towards the preservation of self-identity will be limited by the requirements of morality. Although de Koninck views patriotism as a natural virtue, he recognizes that an unbridled patriotism can result in a dangerous extremism. "Just recently," he writes, "Hitler's national socialism and the biological racism of his minister of culture, Rosenberg, prove the point."¹² For de Koninck, morality begins in self-love. But it also includes love for others. An exclusive love for one's own kind is, on this Christian view, a spurious morality. It is a disguised egoism, a lack of generosity, a vice rather than a virtue.

One might argue that de Koninck's Catholic convictions undermine the usefulness of his political theory. A unified religious state might lead to some kind of religious authoritarianism. In any case, such a state is not a possibility within contemporary Quebec or Canada. But this seems beside the point. Although de Koninck is a sincere Catholic, his political preoccupations are not centred a specific religious convictions but on the more general Aristotelean notion of virtue. He insists that virtue is the purpose of political life. In an age of moral crisis and consumerism, his call to morality remains as relevant as ever.

If de Koninck, like Taylor, is some sort of a communitarian, he views politics, not as the pursuit of self-identity, but as the means to a collective achievement of virtue. If Quebec nationalists like Taylor demand a politics of recognition, opponents demand equality. Taylor believes that self-identity is more important than strict equality. Hence his support of restrictions on the use of English on commercial signs in Quebec. I do not know what de Koninck would have thought about this specific legislation. If, however, the abrogation of specific rights were

¹² "Les peuples soi-disant les plus civilisés ont connu ces dérèglements fratricides et autophagiques. Tout récemment encore—l'avons-nous oublié?—le national-socialisme de Hitler et le racism biologique de son chef culturel, Rosenberg, en ont fait la preuve." De Koninck, p. 3.

to create a class of marginalised citizens, this would be difficult to reconcile with a concern for public morality. It may be that Taylor's distinction between primary and secondary or subordinate rights is not efficacious and needlessly divisive. It certainly conflicts with one reading of the Canadian Constitution. One can perhaps resolve these issues by an additional appeal to some higher notion of the common good. This would be in keeping with the political outlook of a Neo-Thomist thinker like de Koninck.

Political participants in the public debate about the future of Quebec tend to adopt a Taylor-like view. The over-riding concern is with the politics of self-identity. Nationalists exhort Quebecers to separate from Canada in order to preserve their self-identity. The *Parti-Québécois* and the *Bloc-Québécois* owe their political successes, in part, to an largely exclusive preoccupation with Quebec national identity. Federalists insist that one can be a Quebecer and a Canadian. As de Koninck suggests, however, the first political goal within Quebec must be the creation of a moral society. If, for example, we believe that the separation from Canada will make Quebec society more intolerant and less open to ethnic plurality, these are valid moral reasons for opposing such a development.

De Koninck's 1950s account of the Master State may seem old-fashioned. Writing in the shadow of fascism and communist aggrandizement, his fierce attack on totalitarianism is reminiscent of earlier liberal authors like Karl Popper or Isaiah Berlin. If, however, authors like Popper and Berlin recognize the danger of totalitarianism, de Koninck identifies an additional and more subtle danger: consumerism. This is a more subtle form of mind-control which dictates values and norms, dominates public discourse, levels out cultural differences, and facilitates the exercise of power by a certain economic class. De Koninck's account may supply a timely reminder of the pervasive influence of modern commercialism. One observes, in Quebec at the present time, a vocal nationalism which, in a very uncritical way, buys into an American model of consumerism. This cultural phenomenon provides a greater threat to Quebec's survival as a distinct society than any form of federalist politics.

De Koninck and Taylor both argue that the distinct French culture of Quebec should be preserved. One might argue that the old French Quebec culture, the culture associated with an author like Abbé Lionel Groulx, has long since disappeared. Ethnic and linguistic boundaries are no longer so well-defined. The author's wife is, for example, a francophone from Montreal of Italian and French lineage, who completed a degree at the University of British Columbia, married to an anglophone of Irish descent and now resides in Quebec. She is, in some sense, a French Quebecer, but even this is a partial account of her identity. All the more so with her children. They live in Quebec, speak French and English, have francophone and anglophone cousins and grandparents in Calgary and

Montreal. They are informed by both cultures and identities. Their identity is a complex mix of allegiances and loyalties.

One way to update the older model of Quebec culture is to envisage Canada as a community made up of different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups nesting inside of one another. This kind of metaphor allows for a strong Quebec within a strong Canada. It leaves room for a series of robust identities. De Koninck, like Taylor, is a committed federalist. Like Taylor, he argues for some kind of provincial autonomy. Unlike Quebec nationalists, he does not see this as conflicting with a certain *appartenance* within Canada.

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