

## Charles Taylor on "buffered and porous selves"

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By

Over at [The Immanent Frame](#), the SSRC's blog covering secularism and religion, [Charles Taylor](#) has posted an [excellent article](#) on the distinction between modern and what he calls pre-modern senses of self. Taylor characterizes the difference as one between the world of the "porous self"—an "enchanted world" in which spirits and cosmic forces "could cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical," and that of the modern "buffered self" — in which the boundaries between self and other, as well as between mind and body, are much more evident and firm.

An extended quote:

Modern Westerners have a clear boundary between mind and world, even mind and body. Moral and other meanings are "in the mind." They cannot reside outside, and thus the boundary is firm. But formerly it was not so. Let us take a well-known example of influence inhering in an inanimate substance, as this was understood in earlier times. Consider melancholy: black bile was not the cause of melancholy, it embodied, it was melancholy. The emotional life was porous here; it didn't simply exist in an inner, mental space. Our vulnerability to the evil, the inwardly destructive, extended to more than just spirits that are malevolent. It went beyond them to things that have no wills, but are nevertheless redolent with the evil meanings.

See the contrast. A modern is feeling depressed, melancholy. He is told: it's just your body chemistry, you're hungry, or there is a hormone malfunction, or whatever. Straightway, he feels relieved. He can take a distance from this feeling, which is ipso facto declared not justified. Things don't really have this meaning; it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things. This step of disengagement depends on our modern mind/body distinction, and the relegation of the physical to being "just" a contingent cause of the psychic.

But a pre-modern may not be helped by learning that his mood comes from black bile, because this doesn't permit a distancing.

Black bile *is* melancholy. Now he just knows that he's in the grips of the real thing.

In part, this leads the argument that "we moderns," as it were, have an exceptionally difficult time understanding how people once experienced spirits and cosmic forces. Our concepts of "belief" are overly cognitive and fail to convey the experiential and mundane character of an "enchanted world."

This argument reminded me a little of Byron Good's discussion of belief in [Medicine, Rationality and Experience](#), where he shows how anthropological debates about either the "truth" or "rationality" of unlikely (to the anthropologist) beliefs has been shaped by the genealogy of "belief" as a concept. However, Good seems more reluctant to posit an alternative distinction to belief/rationality and even more careful about mapping such a potential distinction onto one of pre-modernity/modernity.

Despite this, I find Taylor's distinction between porous and buffered selves to be a very evocative and potentially useful one. Of course I should probably defer discussion until I read Taylor's new book — [A Secular Age](#); this article is part of a discussion on the SSRC blog on the book. There's a useful review from the NY Times Book Review [here](#).

See: [Buffered and Porous Selves](#), Charles Taylor.

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