·OUR REVIEWERS·

JOHN COTTINGHAM is professor emeritus of philosophy at Reading University

OLIVER LETWIN was MP for West Dorset from 1997 to 2019 • **GUY STAGG** is the author of The Crossway

Rebuilding our moral being

A prize-winning philosopher explores the power of poetry in resisting the march of secularism

JOHN COTTINGHAM

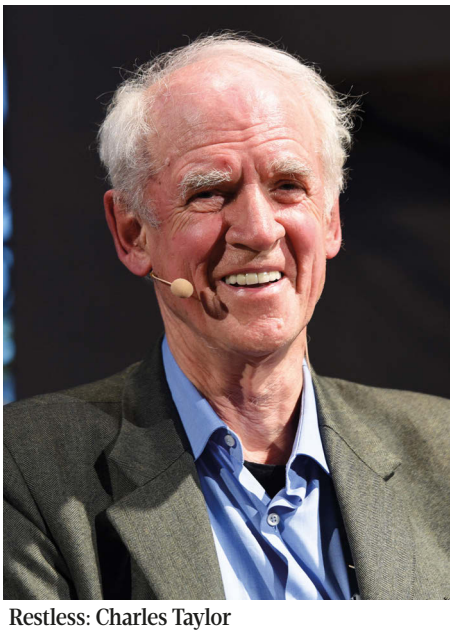
Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment
CHARLES TAYLOR
(BELKNAP PRESS, 640 PP, £31.95)

CHARLES TAYLOR is not a philosopher content to rest on his laurels. His wide-ranging and immensely influential *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989) was followed by the acclaimed *A Secular Age* (2007), which charted, in magisterial detail, the destabilisation of old certainties. The honours he has garnered for this and other work have included the prestigious Templeton Prize (2007) and the conferral, in 2019, of the Ratzinger Prize by Pope Francis, who praised Taylor's search for "new ways to express the transcendent dimensions of the human soul". Now, at the age of 92, Taylor has produced yet another massive and groundbreaking volume, exemplifying once more his formidable erudition and the breadth of his philosophical insight.

An enduring theme in all Taylor's work is the way in which dominant modern ways of seeing ourselves and the world have led to a fragmentation of our moral being. So in *Sources of the Self*, he criticised philosophical accounts from David Hume onwards which reduce our existence through time to a psychological flux, a mere series of conscious episodes, losing the vital sense of a moral shape and direction to our lives. Now, in *Cosmic Connections*, he explores another kind of fragmentation – the loss of our intimate relationship with the natural world. So the problems of the "desiccated, etiolated agent", the thinned-out self, bereft of its moral compass, are compounded by the problems arising from the modern conception of a "flattened", mechanistic universe, which we may aspire to map out and control, but which is no longer our true home.

TAYLOR ARGUES that these two sources of discontent, the "flattened world" and the "etiolated agent", are closely related, intellectually and spiritually. We need to "recover our identities as incarnate knowers" – that is, we need to regain the sense that we are not mere detached agents attempting to map and control the world around us, but "living experiencing beings" who are ourselves an integral part of the cosmos we inhabit.

PHOTO: ALAMY/DPA, HORST GALUSCHKA



Restless: Charles Taylor

In Cosmic Connections, he explores the loss of our intimate relationship with the natural world

How do we recover this connectedness, so vital to our spiritual health? Rather than articulating the way forward through abstract philosophical argument alone, Taylor suggests, following Wittgenstein's well-known warnings about the limits of purely factual language, that the answer needs to be shown rather than stated. And the way it is shown is through the power of poetry. What follows is a detailed exploration of what a wide range of Romantic and post-Romantic poets right down to the present day show us about the human need for cosmic connection, pointing us to a "mode of awareness of the surrounding world … shot through with joy, significance, inspiration".

The chosen authors include Hölderlin, Novalis, Shelley, Keats, Hopkins, Rilke, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and T. S. Eliot. The broad sweep, so typical of Taylor's effortless cultural grasp, defies summary – nor indeed would he wish to elide the variety and complexity into a simple formula. But one theme that powerfully emerges is that we should resist the all too common tendency to split our experience into two components – an "objective" component relating to what is "out there" in the world, and a "subjective" component relating purely to our own sensations or perceptions. The truths disclosed in great poetry cannot be reduced to either truths about the external world or else truths about ourselves in abstraction from the world; rather they relate to what Taylor calls "the interspace". Poetry connects us with "interspatial realities", which reveal an object "as we live it, as it reverberates in us". Those who share Taylor's admiration for Gerard Manley Hopkins, and what is conveyed, for example, in his famous poem "The Windhover", will see at once what he means.

IF A RELIGIOUS message is implicit in all this, it is never laboured, nor does Taylor peremptorily insist on a return to the "grand cosmic narratives" of an earlier age. But we are left in no doubt that the human longing for reconnection signals a deep spiritual need, a yearning that is "a perennial feature of human life". Such a need is inseparably connected with "the ethical in the widest and deepest sense – that is, with the full good life, fulfilled life, life as it was meant to be".

Taylor adds that for some people the latter phrase will imply a reference to a creator God, while for others it will be a placeholder for "whatever our nature or being calls on us to be". The undogmatic tone here is manifest throughout this wonderfully rich and stimulating volume. And aptly enough, the book ends on a practical rather than theoretical or doctrinal note, by underlining the importance of spiritual praxis, including "ritual, story, ceremony and solemn assembly", which, for many, will be "what gives us the wisdom and the strength to realise this full life". It is a message that will resonate with many in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, among others. But the wider plea, inherent in almost every page of *Cosmic Connections*, and indeed in Charles Taylor's *oeuvre* as a whole, is that we should not be prevented by the march of secularism from having the courage to ask "questions whose answers are crucial to our self-understanding as humans".