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Charles Taylor and the (Modern) Self

CIPRIAN BOGDAN

Introduction. Crises of Modern Identity

It is usually said that thinking begins by questions. Our basic question is: What makes Charles Taylor different from other philosophers? A synthetic answer could be: Taylor is different because of his constant effort to define *identity* (especially modern identity). Surely, by this we don't mean he is the only one who paid attention to this problem, rather he is among the few who places identity in the very core of our major philosophical problems – theory, practice and aesthetics, the three domains defining the modern imaginary are, in this view, all issues involving identity.

We think, by placing Taylor's vision in a larger context, that his works try to offer a solution to three major crises running through modernity, all related to our understanding of human being. What is all about? Before starting a more detailed description of this major shifts, we must have a relative agreement around the concept of *modernity*: we trace modern world (of course, in a more symbolical manner) at the end of 18th century around a few important cultural figures such as Kant, Herder, or Hegel, having also in mind, as Taylor carefully does, the fact that this beginning is actually the result of previous cultural and structural developments – especially the changes occurred in 17th century due to the emergence of science and Protestantism¹. Having this said, we can proceed in describing the major crises that, we believe, Taylor identifies, more or less in the same distinct manner as we present them, as covering the main problems of modern identity².

(a) The *first* crisis is directly related to the spectacular marching of scientific thought (since 17th century) to the centre of our "social imaginary" and resulting in the spread of predominantly *neutral* or *impersonal* definitions of human being meaning a picture of the human self as a non-cultural product, a self envisioned as a *bearer* of some kind of pure consciousness sovereignly coordinating its "innate thoughts" (Descartes), "habits" (Locke, Hume), "*a priori* categories" (Kant), "subjective rights", or social functions. This self tends to be defined, as Taylor believes, through its ability to *disengage* itself from the cultural background in order to have

¹ Jürgen HABERMAS in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1985, also traces modernity at the end of 18th century: Kant is the major turning point in this emergence, but only with Hegel modernity becomes aware of itself.

² Charles TAYLOR in *Etica autenticității*, Romanian transl. by Al. Moldovan, Editura Idea, Cluj, 2006, pp. 9-13, clearly identifies, for example, three major sources of discontentment that partially correspond to the description we offer about modern identity crises: the first one is originated in modern *individualism* that often sees itself as being self-referential, disconnected from community; the second one is located in the spread of the *instrumental reasoning* that transforms nature and humans in potential resources for technological or economic growth; the third one lies in *politics* and it has to do with the growing refusal of individuals to involve themselves in the public life.

a value-free, scientific look on the world. No wonder, therefore, that the faculty that this vision values the most is its self-consciousness, a faculty that allows the self to objectify not only its social and natural environment, but also itself. The paradox lies, following Heidegger, in the fact that this neutral definition of the self can provide two different perspectives on personal identity: *on the one hand*, the self is a detached observer of the world (in Kant's case, for example, reason is not something we can trace anymore in God or nature, but in the human spirit itself), *on the other hand*, the self is only a small piece (object) in a social or natural system (the horrified social imaginary, for example, about human beings reduced to pure economic functions is already prepared by the cultural shift from a traditional-hierarchical world to a scientific-uniform one in which people are caught up in a deterministic universal machinery).

But, in order to make things clearer, we must answer the following questions: in what terms can we best describe the crisis brought by this new vision of the self? Moreover, this redefinition brings only problems, or we have also positive aspects that we should mention? Answering the latter, this development has had, undoubtedly, substantial positive effects: to mention only the subjective rights that allow individuals to emancipate from arbitrary social pressure and to open themselves towards universal forms of identification. But, on the other hand, this neutral, non-cultural perspective has brought also a reductive image about human being: destroying the old world which could embrace the selves more or less coherently and consistently in a hierarchical order – we must avoid, as Taylor does, a nostalgic look on these times –, the new world offers instead an *atomistic* alternative in which autonomous individuals try whether to assure some kind of fragile consensus (in the best scenario), or to impose their own truth against other individuals perceived as adversaries (in the worst scenario). We believe that perhaps the best formula which can describe the crisis of this neutral view is, following this time Peter Sloterdijk, the development of a *cynical* consciousness. Two hundred years after Kant's famous *Critique of Pure Reason*, Sloterdijk writes his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. His aim is to uncover the huge gap created between the initial ideals of Enlightenment and its effective results. Thus, instead of a harmoniously designed society formed by rational agents, we have ended up in a social world where everybody tries to survive through a disengaged or cynical reasoning: we don't believe anymore, in order to give some examples of this cynicism, in ideals but we need them because we must pragmatically maintain some kind of individual or social order; or, we cannot trust anyone because we suspiciously and polemically know that everybody tries to survive on our behalf¹.

(b) The *second* crisis, on the other hand, can be related to another perspective on human being: the self is not defined so much as a neutral agency, but, following Taylor, more as an *expressive, self-creative* being. Having its origins in the Romantic movement, this view tries, in Taylor's opinion, to connect the individual with nature and society: *authenticity*, as its best known ideal, represents a kind of *expression* that doesn't sacrifice our natural desires in the name of reason or society, on the contrary, it succeeds miraculously to combine all these elements (at least in the first moment, in the more enthusiastic Romantic writings). We are authentic when we are able to express our natural needs in a highly personal

¹ Peter SLOTERDIJK, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1983.

manner. The model of this view is not so much a disengaged, self-reflective reason, but more an *artistic* impulse which brings to light some of its potential, creatively transforming the self and its environment. If the first definition values mostly our capacity of being self-conscious, of detaching ourselves from arbitrary socio-cultural contexts, the second one emphasizes our capacity to provide a creative *meaning* to our life. We have the power to transform ourselves and our environment. But where is the crisis in this scenario? The problems appear when, as Taylor notices, we radicalize the premises of this view, when we put too much emphasis on the individual. There are two options here: *on the one hand*, the individual can be considered, in a Nietzschean manner, as a perfectly self-productive being that can denounce, in the name of his creative will to power, social solidarity, he is strong enough to remake himself endlessly¹; *on the other hand*, the individual can be described, in an existentialist manner, as a being who is projected in a confusing cultural context, defined by the famous formula: "everything is possible", destined to make decisions on his own without any kind of certainty (social or metaphysical) about his choice. The name for this loss of meaning, due to the radical contingency of the modern world, is *nihilism*: no meaning can be secured by external references (God, society, nature etc.), all we have left are individuals capable (or not) to face this groundless situation.

(c) The *third* crisis can be related to a more *socio-cultural* and also *political* definition of the self: in order to have a self, we have to be, as Taylor often emphasizes, part of a community and culture; moreover we have to participate in the political arena of this community because we are, as already said, primarily public beings. All these dimensions are, in Taylor's view, unthinkable without *language*, the medium through which we can understand each other, developing some kind of *consensus* about our most important *values* regarding society and nature. Having all these in mind, the worst alternative we can imagine is, following Hegel, that of *alienated* individuals that are cut off from their community by a pathological retreat in their private realms. The social consensus seems broken. But we can say that in fact there are two sides of this shift: the *first* one can be described, as Hegel does, in terms of an individual alienating himself from his community, discovering through negation (self-reflection) his own (incomplete) individuality; the *second* one can be defined by another kind of mutilation, one which happens in the middle of the community and takes the shape of pure conformism, the individual is part of the community but he lacks a voice of his own, following, more or less blindly, other people².

Having this larger perspective, our aim is from now on to follow the three lines of thought mentioned above through some of Charles Taylor's works, also keeping in mind the fact that these lines are always related to each other and often mixed up: the view of the self as a disengaged being, for example, is at the root, as Taylor believes, of the rising of nihilism (this neutral perspective suspends any kind of strong distinctions which enables us to evaluate something as good or bad, noble or ignoble etc.) but also alienation (the atomism brought by disengagement erodes the political involvement required by the community).

¹ Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für alle und keinen*, Alfred Kröner, Stuttgart, 1930.

² Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Heidegger are among those who sharply criticize the leveling of the individual by anonymous social structures.

The Disengaged Self

In his first book, *Explanation of Behaviour*, Taylor has already clearly pointed toward his opponents: in this particular case, the behaviorism (developed by the American psychologist Skinner) which, during the 1950's seemed to have some impact on human sciences. Taylor reacts against behaviorism because of its reductive definition of human being: according to this, all we are can be reduced to the interplay of stimulus and responses; we are lacking any kind of inner depth, intentionality or complexity because our self is nothing but a reactive agency responding to external stimuli¹. Drawing its inspiration from phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty), Taylor emphasizes, against an already criticized behaviorism (in the 1960's, when Taylor published his book, behaviorism lost a great deal of its influence), that human action is intentional and not a simple reaction to stimuli. But, in fact, behaviorism is only a small and recent ramification of a larger and more profound development defining, since 17th century, Western culture. Taylor often uses the term "*naturalism*" in order to capture this massive change. But how can we define it? Naturalism, as a product of scientific thinking, adopts a critical stance against all previous metaphysical or religious assumptions by portraying human being not predominantly as a creation of God or culture, but rather of nature (as science defines it: a region with exact and impersonal features)². The self is a part of nature, but having one important advantage: the humans are the only objects/animals with consciousness³. Therefore, it is not a surprise that naturalism emphasizes *epistemology* against *morals*, leaving out, in this way, the whole cultural background that in fact, thinks Taylor, shapes our identity⁴. But what are, more exactly, the features of naturalism? This view covers, under a neutral appearance, several values that are (inconsistently) rejected as having a moral dimension: "*disengagement*", "*autonomy*" or "*freedom*" are, for example, the main values imprinted in the "*moral topography*" of naturalism (despite its reluctance regarding such qualitative distinctions, it cannot avoid making them)⁵.

Disengagement refers to the major shift, already present in Descartes's and Locke's writings, by which the self is portrayed as having the capacity to suspend the *intentional* character of its own mind (the intentionality is the faculty of our mind, relating us to something; we don't think in general, as Husserl puts it, we rather think about specific objects): the self is therefore no longer viewed as something intimately related to its body, form of life or culture⁶, but, on the contrary, it is perceived as a pure consciousness "suspending" everything outside itself and "examining" afterwards in a "clear and distinct" (Descartes) manner its surroundings⁷. As Taylor briefly expresses it: "Disengagement involves our going outside

¹ Charles TAYLOR, *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers 1*, Cambridge University Press, London, New York, 1985, p. 2.

² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

⁴ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, 1997, p. 34.

⁵ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis. Politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 1998, p. 345.

⁶ Charles TAYLOR, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 62.

⁷ IDEM, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, p. 168.

the first-person stance and taking on board some theory, or at least some supposition, about how things work"¹. Strangely enough, this flight outside the *subjective* view towards a *third-person perspective* is an inconsistent one because, as Taylor notices (following one of Heidegger's insights): "Radical objectivity is only intelligible and accessible through radical subjectivity"². But naturalism also goes hand in hand with a "foundationalist" model concerned with reaching absolute *certainty* about the way reality reflects in our mind³. Therefore, by suspending intentionality, we end up in radically different kind of relation with the world, a relation defined mainly by mirroring things, as accurately as possible, in our mind. Rationalism and empiricism, despite their differences, agree both on this point: philosophy has to explain the basic model by which things are *represented* in our thought. Furthermore, all these have great consequences for the way we describe *language*. Naturalism, foundationalism, representationalism etc., all consider language nothing more than an *instrument* of the mind simply describing mental representations of neutral facts, therefore the language is reduced to a second hand product of a more basic structure of our consciousness (whether ideas, signs, or associations)⁴.

Besides disengagement, naturalism also emphasizes, in an unprecedented manner, the *autonomy* and *freedom* of the self. We are by nature autonomous beings, outside the influence of any kind of cultural, political or religious authority⁵. Disengagement of the mind and autonomy of the will generate a powerful mixture, preparing the way for a vision centered predominantly on instrumental rationality: "Radical disengagement opens the prospect of self-remaking"⁶. The will's main function is, from now on, to produce, as long as we are viewed as creatures of nature, the maximum of individual happiness and pleasure⁷. The result is, therefore, quite obvious: disengagement and autonomy describe society, according to Taylor, in terms of an aggregate made out of individual *atoms* in which every single atom is portrayed as having the possibility, due to an impersonal reason and a instrumental will, to radically *re-create* itself and its environment. This view is the main source for those liberal ramifications (if we take in account the political tradition) that end up, as Taylor believes, in a highly damaging (because undermines people's motivation for participating in public life) and inconsistent (because of an absurd radicalization of the idea of individual autonomy) *self-referential* individualism⁸.

In his major work *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity*, Taylor brings to light those Western values that have fundamentally contributed in shaping modern identity. An unavoidable stop in this journey is Greek philosophy (especially Plato): Taylor identifies some of the ideas that, later on, will develop, through successive radicalizations, into the modern perspective of the self. Plato, for example, opens the prospect of modern self by his emphasis (criticizing in this way the Homeric view which allowed a fragmented self with unexpected flows of

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 162-163.

² *Ibidem*, 176.

³ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 40.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

⁵ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, pp. 193-194.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁸ IDEM, "Two Theories of Modernity", *The Hastings Center Report* 25, no. 2 (1995), <http://www.questia.com>, p. 18 (Accessed on 12 February 2007).

energy coming from gods) on the centering and unification of the self through the soul¹. Even though, Plato argues, as in the case of the Greek dispute between individual soul and *polis* (the space of political action), in favor of the soul, he still remains very far from those theories embracing modern individualism based on the radical distinction between inner and outer². The basic reason for this inadequacy is the fact that Plato identifies truth and values not in *us*, but in a *hierarchically* structured *cosmic* order³. The next step in self's journey is Augustin, the famous Christian theologian considered one of the most important representatives of the cultural synthesis between Greek philosophy and Christian faith. Augustin is, according to Taylor, the first one who brings to light "*radical reflexivity*", a new kind of thinking concerned not so much with outside reality, but with the activity of thought itself⁴. The *first-person* perspective that tries to capture the way the world is *for us* has now entered Western culture⁵. Therefore, Augustin must engage, in order to make this transformation, the radical idea of a sharp distinction between inner (soul) and outer (body, world)⁶. Furthermore, he is at the origin of another major shift: Augustin manages to secure, against a powerful Socratic tradition in which passions are nothing but mere instruments for reason, an autonomous status for the will. It is not enough, from now on, to believe that *knowing* the truth/good is the equivalent of *willing* or *wanting* the truth/good. We can rationally have access to real truth (for Augustin: Christianity), but still rejecting, on the basis of a distorted will that supports a self-absorbed reflexivity, our relation to this truth (God).

Plato and Augustin, despite their contribution in forging the vision of modern self, are still far, Taylor believes, from those premises that allowed Descartes to change so radically the way we see ourselves⁷. Even though Descartes continues some Augustinian ideas⁸, he introduces in the same time, under the pressure of scientific discoveries from 17th century, a radicalization in both subjectivity and objectivity, first and third-person perspective. What is all about? Contrary to Augustin, Descartes places our moral sources almost entirely in ourselves⁹. *Ego cogito, cogito ergo sum* means exactly the fact that the existence of the self is not related predominantly to a God-creator, but rather to our mind. Descartes's universe denies the aristotelic teleology (in which reality is the result of a process of actualization following some predetermined *telos* or model) bringing instead a cold mechanistic image of the world. Our mind, sharply distinct from the body (the famous mind-body dualism), is from now on concerned mostly with having a correct representation of things. The "*ideas*" are not placed (as in Plato's case) in a transcendent realm, but in our spirit which, in the same time, *produces* the proper order of this ideas¹⁰. If the Platonic reason is looking for a "*substantive*" reality lying outside ourselves, the new reason is, on the contrary, preoccupied with *procedures* that allow us to mirror nature in our mind¹¹. Therefore, in order to attain objectivity, we

¹ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 118, 120.

² *Ibidem*, p. 121.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 137-138.

⁸ *Ibidem* p. 141.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

necessarily have to go through a radical subjectivity which suspends everything outside it. But one step further, Descartes emphasizes, as never before, the major importance of the "strength of will" based on an "ethics of rational control", the old ethic centered on "generosity" is replaced by another one focusing on the "dignity" of human beings¹.

Another important figure, in this line of thought, is the famous empiricist John Locke who seems to be, at least in Taylor's reading, close to the rationalist Descartes. Locke is also impressed by the new scientific vocabulary and this impact can be easily traced in his ideas: he rejects the old Aristotelian order, and he also takes further the Cartesian disengagement by objectifying nature and the self (getting out of the first-person perspective) and by suspending and examining all our previous beliefs that connected us to our body, culture, religion etc. As a good empiricist, he denies innate ideas, putting instead habits formed by experience: "We are creatures of ultimately contingent connections: we have formed certain habits. But we can break from them and re-form them"². Taylor describes Locke's image of the self as a "punctual self":

"The subject, who can make this kind of radical stance of disengagement to himself or herself with a view to remaking, is what I want to call a 'punctual self'. To take this stance is to identify oneself with the power to objectify and remake, and by this act to distance oneself from all particular features which are objects of potential change"³.

This self is "extensionless", in the way that it is nothing concrete, but exists only in its capacity to order things⁴. Locke identifies this self with *consciousness*, rejecting in the same time the idea of substance (material or immaterial). From a moral point of view, Locke portrays the self or the person as being a "forensic term" based on the idea of punishment and reward. The person is a moral agent which assumes responsibility for his actions and seeks for future retributions. But this definition only continues, in Taylor's view, the reification of the human self, an abstract being cut off from its intimate relation to its body, language or culture⁵.

Taylor presents us, in his large attempt to make sense of the cultural genesis of the modern world, four major sources that shaped our understanding of the self: a) the disengaged self (Descartes, Locke); b) the idea of "self-exploration" (Montaigne); c) the emergence of "personal commitment"; d) and the emphasis on "ordinary life"⁶. The first two of them are forms of radical reflexivity (self-exploration anticipates the later expressivism emerging at the end of 18th century), meanwhile personal commitment is meant to designate the fact that after 17th century, due mostly to the Reform, the community is not something given that one instantly accepts, but it involves personal deliberation⁷.

Another important cultural moment is "radical Enlightenment" that further uses disengagement as a weapon against tradition (whether metaphysical or religious) reducing the self to a radically natural being. The radical *Aufklärer* sharply

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 152-153.

² *Ibidem*, p. 170.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 172.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 193-195.

argues that we have to reject any kind of cosmological order and we should instead simply focus on our nature in order to understand it and control it. The ethic consistent with this kind of thought is a utilitarian one: we are natural creatures seeking happiness and pleasure and avoiding pain. Therefore, Enlightenment rejects "constitutive goods" in the name of "life goods" (values oriented towards ordinary life) such as: a) the ideal of a "self-responsible reason"; b) "the ordinary fulfillments that we seek by nature" (happiness, work, family); c) the ideal of "universal and impartial benevolence"¹. But Enlightenment falls into a "pragmatic contradiction" (as, in fact, any instrumental reasoning) when, on the one hand, it rejects any kind of "strong evaluation" (the belief that there are goals that "are incommensurable with our other desires and purposes")² and, on the other hand, it implicitly assumes some strong values as those mentioned above.

Kant reacts, despite his close ties with the *Aufklärung*, against its two-sided, reductive anthropology: the *first* side focuses on human subjectivity by defining the self in relation to scientific objectivity, meanwhile the *second* one concentrates on the idea that human beings are essentially products of nature³. Kant is highly critical to this portrayal of man as natural being defined by desire and by its (small) place in a deterministic universe. The individual has, in such an asphyxiating universe, no freedom and, therefore, no dignity. Taylor, when talking about Kant, seems to have a relatively ambivalent attitude: he admires, on the one hand, the above mentioned reaction of Kant to radical Enlightenment and also his argument against Hume remarkably anticipating the phenomenological idea of intentionality⁴, but, on the other hand, he rejects Kant because of his culture-neutral definition of the self. Kant is at the origin of another great radicalization of self's understanding, brilliantly managing to offer an almost perfect self-referential picture of man: all we need, says Kant, is produced in us, in our reason that secures our theoretical, practical and artistic judgments. That is why Taylor places Kant in a tradition (starting with Descartes) that he wants to avoid opting instead for the other great reaction to the cold-hearted radical Enlightenment: *expressivism* or Romanticism.

The disengaged understanding of the self, despite the critics, becomes the dominant trend in modern culture. Sociology, psychology, and even psychoanalysis are all different branches of the same tree rooted in the 17th century revolution of science⁵. This scientific approach defines a person as a being having consciousness, consciousness meaning here the capacity to frame our representations of external objects⁶. According to this view, the human mind has all the neutral ingredients of a machine; the only thing that distinguishes humans from computers is the fact that humans possess consciousness⁷. Therefore, language is also reduced

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 321-322.

² *Ibidem*, p. 332.

³ IDEM, *Hegel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York, 1975, p. 10.

⁴ Taylor in *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 71, notices that Kant argues against Hume by saying that our mind cannot be the product of individual sensations because these have to be recognized as being sensations, therefore, it has to be something that preexists these bits of information and coordinates them in a coherent and consistent manner. This capacity will later be called (by Husserl) intentionality and will involve the relation of the mind and its objects by reference to a cultural background.

⁵ Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, pp. 33-34.

⁶ IDEM, *Human Agency and Language...cit.*, p. 98.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

to the function of *designating*, as accurately as possible, external reality. The HLC (from Hobbes, Locke and Condillac) theory of language, as Taylor with an ironic touch names it, closely follows the pattern of a scientific model in which language is nothing but a humble and transparent instrument of our underneath representations free from any kind of subjective distortion (human intentionality, emotions, desires etc.)¹.

Another symptom related to our instrumental understanding can be traced in the concept of "negative liberty" (a famous formula of Isaiah Berlin, Taylor's professor at Oxford in his early years) which hides, in a subtle manner, our tendency to adopt a culture-neutral and value-free perspective. Taylor notices (continuing a long political tradition) that negative liberty opposes "positive liberty": the *first* one goes from the assumption that human being is free as long as it has no external obstacles that limit its freedom, the emphasis here is on *possibility* and less on our *acts* to reach freedom; the *second* one is rather preoccupied with the way we struggle, as cultural beings, in order to become free by overcoming our internal (motivational) and external obstacles². Negative liberty (one of the main formulas of liberalism) is, in fact, indebted to naturalism because it makes no strong distinctions between its obstacles, these are all the same, freedom exists only when we overcome every obstacle (that's why the State, for example, in this liberal reading, must not actively intervene in society, but it must only neutrally prevent disorder)³. Society follows the image of nature: values/objects are exposed to a neutral observation without qualitative distinctions that would jeopardize this perfect uniformity. Positive liberty, on the other hand, assumes a cultural background in which some obstacles are more important to overcome than others. It's obvious, in this case, Taylor's political background as a communitarian that reacts against a liberalism that unrealistically places human being in empty contexts that are filled only afterwards with ideas/values created *ex nihilo* by every individual.

But Taylor's critique is pointed not only against those (neo)liberal thinkers blind to cultural arguments, but also against more social sensitive thinkers such as, for example, Habermas. Taylor admires at Habermas the great emphasis on communication and intersubjectively developing identity, but on the other hand rejects Habermas's position on the ground that only further continues a formal-procedural approach that comes from utilitarians and Kant⁴. The ideal of "undistorted communication" (Habermas's famous formula) is not necessarily a solution to the problem of motivating people in order to involve themselves actively in public life and also to have an authentic personal existence. Habermas presents his theory as being context-free, blind to cultural differences, but, says Taylor, the ideal of undistorted communication already presupposes, by emphasizing it against other ideals, some kind of previous strong evaluation. Therefore, this universal-formal ideal is an abstract theory (and Habermas is the only individual he believes in it) as long as this ideal is not internalized by specific individuals living in a culture in order to motivate them towards action⁵.

¹ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 102.

² IDEM, *Negative Freiheit? Zur Kritik des neuzeitlichen Individualismus*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, pp. 121-122.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 126-128.

⁴ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 86.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

Self-interpreting Animals. The Ideal of Authenticity

Taylor's effort to offer an alternative to the all pervasive naturalism takes the form of two philosophical approaches that in a way can sum up his vision: *firstly*, Taylor wants to elaborate a *philosophical anthropology* (for example, in *Human Agency and Language*) that should clarify the *universal* possibilities that define the concept of *person*; *secondly*, he attempts, in order to sustain the first project, to define *modern self* (in the already mentioned *Sources of the Self*) by going back in Western culture and bringing to light those values that constitute the horizon of our present understanding of the self¹. Following these two dynamics we can also understand the rather minor difference between *self* and *identity*: the concept of the self predominantly covers a universal meaning designating those conditions that make possible self-understanding; identity, on the other hand, has a more specific meaning describing rather those particular actualizations of the self (we could say that we have only one self but with several identities: professor, parent, Romanian etc.)².

Reacting to the impersonal approaches of identity, Taylor replaces the famous Kantian question: "What is the man?" with a more personal one: "Who am I?". The third-person perspective forgets, according to Taylor, about a fundamental feature of the self or person: the notion of "self-understanding" meaning here not only that we possess a certain knowledge of ourselves, but, more profoundly, that we are partially constituted by this understanding. Going deeper, self-understanding embodies our perception about us relating it to a background of strong evaluation. Being a person or a self, says Taylor, means to exist in a space defined by qualitative distinctions, that is, a space that opens the self towards fundamental questions that he partially tries and manages to answer³. Taylor introduces here the famous formula of human beings as "*self-interpreting animals*". This 20th century's major thesis (having its origin in the Romanticism) developed by Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and even Habermas replaces the old formula of man as "*animal rationale*" because of its excessively intellectualistic view⁴. By adopting this anthropological reading, we necessarily accept the idea that human being cannot be described reductively as an *object*. Naturalism understands object as an entity existing outside our interpretations, a person, on the other hand, exists only as self-interpretation⁵. The naturalist emphasis on abstract consciousness objectifying its body and the natural world are now replaced with the idea of an *engaged* self intimately accepting its culture (self-interpreting) and its own body (animal). Furthermore, Taylor tries to connect, against the naturalist way of thinking, understanding or reason with emotions and language⁶. Taylor's hypothesis regarding our emotions rejects the idea of some pure emotions not incorporating an implicit understanding of the meaning that things have for us (their *value* for us) and also not intentionally referring to a particular object. "Human life is never without interpreted feelings; the

¹ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, p. 83.

² *Ibidem*, p. 84.

³ Charles TAYLOR, *Human Agency and Language...cit.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

interpretation is constitutive to the feeling.¹ Taylor introduces the concept of "import" in order to make things more clear: an import can be defined as a way by which something can be relevant or important for our desires, purposes, aspirations, or our feelings². We cannot adopt a purely impersonal stance towards reality because we are part of a world saturated with cultural values, every object means being felt/interpreted/valued by a subject in a particular context according to some background that he incorporated.

Self-interpreting animal also radically redefines our relationship with *language*. Taylor, following the expressivist tradition and phenomenology (especially Heidegger and Gadamer), considers language not as a medium helping in the process of mirroring reality in our mind, but the most important way to define ourselves. Language means *expression* and not description. For Taylor, expression is not creation *ex nihilo*: human being is not born in paradise in order to be the first which names the things around it, but rather it is a historical-cultural being that is projected in a world already having its meanings. Therefore "expression partakes of both finding and making"³. *On the one hand*, every articulation brings to light some of the implicit interpretation lying in cultural horizon but, *on the other hand*, every interpretation re-creates, on the basis of an irreducible difference inscribed in every individual, this background. The whole of culture is always partially brought to light, being filtered by a personal interpretation. Moreover, language has the capacity (replacing, in this way, the reign of abstract consciousness) to assure the *unity and continuity* of the self through personal *narrative*. Identity is not reducible only to the question of "who we are now?", but also to "what we are going to be?" and to "what we were?". Our personal narrative manages to bring, despite the changes, these temporal dimensions together by describing life as a "quest" (MacIntyre), as a story with an open end that progressively unfolds itself. Moreover, our life-history filtered by our personal narrative gives us the possibility to relate ourselves to the whole of our existence, unifying all the fragments of our life in a relatively consistent story⁴.

Taylor, by positing himself in the expressivist line of thought, acknowledges the most important value of this cultural tradition: the *ideal of authenticity*. If autonomy relates to the impersonal approach initiated by Descartes, meaning, *stricto sensu* to give our own law, authenticity further continues this tendency towards internalization by focusing, this time, on the ideal of being in harmony with ourselves, with our own natural desires and needs⁵. Taylor speaks about the ideal or ethics of authenticity in order to demonstrate the strong connection between morals and artistic impulses (our desires that must be creatively expressed). We are, despite our personal originality, social creatures. Taylor offers an interesting solution to the relationship between our natural dimension (needs, desires), on the one hand, and our socio-moral one (ideals, values), on the other hand, succeeding in a way to avoid the old and dead-end conflictive distinction between *nature* and *culture*. There is no pure nature that simply lies outside our cultural interpretations, but only a nature that is absorbed by society through early socialization. Children are, for example, educated by family and society in order to incorporate the values

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

² *Ibidem*, p. 49.

³ Charles TAYLOR *apud* Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, p. 152.

⁴ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, pp. 47-50.

⁵ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, p. 196.

of the present cultural horizon. At this stage, children internalize non-reflectively these values, shaping in this way their nature, that is, their needs and desires (we know that emotions are necessarily framed by an already existing cultural interpretation); later on, as adults, human beings are in the position to reflectively claim authenticity as a way of being, therefore, in harmony with their firstly socialized nature¹. To sum up, Taylor wants to offer a common ground to the classical oppositions between individual/society (individual cannot exist outside society and culture) or nature/culture (neither of them can be imagined without the other).

Taylor traces along the tradition of a disengaged self initiated by the cold rationalist Descartes, another tradition initiated this time by the warm-hearted French writer Montaigne (17th century). Taylor names this new ramification of Western culture "*self-exploration*". If Descartes looks for some absolute point securing our knowledge of the world, Montaigne has only but doubts about the possibility we can perfectly understand ourselves. He becomes insecure from the moment he sits at his table trying to write about himself and discovering that his life is nothing but a changing flux in which all he can do is to maintain some kind of balance. Montaigne ends up, in this way, not in some impersonal point of view from where he has privileged access to the world, but in a profoundly first-person perspective from where the self is nothing but individual fragments put together through self-exploration and expression in a never complete personal story. Montaigne is, therefore, the source of another type of individualism than the one originating in Descartes, an individualism fully developing in Romantic expressivism and in all those modern trends praising the authenticity of autobiography².

At the end of the 18th century there are signs of another important cultural shift. The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau dethrones, in his attempt to fight radical Enlightenment, reason for our sentiments, also enlarging our "inner voice" (radical subjectivity) by which he means that we are able to know only from inside us (and not from some external point) what nature considers being important³. Rousseau rejects all the Enlightenment's optimistic narratives about progress, opting instead for a return to nature: society only artificially multiplies our needs and our dependence on other people. Rousseau believes, therefore, that being authentic is the equivalent of being moral (of not depending on the image that others project on us).

But the major revolution, according to Taylor, lies in the works of German philosopher Herder. Well known as the father of nationalism (even though this label is not entirely an accurate one), he can also be considered as the father of the expressivist individualism⁴. If "dignity" progressively becomes the major value of that modern individualism (universal and egalitarian) coming from Descartes and Kant, "authenticity" is the ideal, emerging with Herder, of an expressivist individualism. Herder critically replaces the old vision according to which the shape of identity is the result of our position in a hierarchical society with another vision

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 197 and see also Charles TAYLOR, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 118.

² Charles TAYLOR, "Inwardness and the Culture of Modernity", in Axel HONNETTH, Thomas McCARTY, Claus OFFE, Albrecht WELMER (eds), *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1992, pp. 105-108.

³ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 362.

⁴ IDEM, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne, 1979, p. 3.

praising our natural differences as individuals (the individual is the measure of things, according to Herder). Authenticity means, therefore, that our way of being is not socially but rather internally generated¹. Reacting also against Enlightenment and its artificially producing distinctions (such as: individual/society or culture; reason/sensitivity; mind/body etc.), Herder proposes instead, according to Taylor, a new kind of unity originated in the expressive work of art:

"Human life was seen as having a unity rather analogous of a work of art, where every part or aspect only found its proper meaning in relation to all others. Human life unfolded from some central core – a guiding theme or inspiration – or should do so, if it were not so often blocked or distorted." Moreover, "the image of expression was central to this view not just in that it provided the model for the unity of human life, but also in that men reached their highest fulfillment in expressive activity"².

For Herder there is no abstract thinking, only language-dependent reflexivity. Therefore, Herder introduces a new kind of *self-consciousness* producing a synthesis between *being* and *meaning* (one of the Enlightenment's rigid distinctions), or between Aristotle's teleology and the modern idea of "self-defining subjectivity": the man as a conscious being means recognizing his life as a real expression of what he potentially is (Herder adopts here the attitude of an artist recognizing himself in his creation)³. Moreover, Herder, by admitting the central place of language in cultural (national) identity, places human being in a community, trying in this way to overcome a tension that haunted his time: that between the idealized ancient Greek community and the individual freedom (praised by Enlightenment)⁴.

But the philosopher who, according to Taylor, realizes in the most spectacular manner the above mentioned synthesizes is Hegel. The German thinker seems to be facing two alternatives popular in Germany at the beginning of 19th century: the alternative offered by the Kantian philosophy focusing on individual autonomy based on rationality and the one represented by expressivism (Herder and the following Romantics: Schlegel, Novalis etc.) praising enthusiastically the unity of man with inner/outer nature and society⁵. Hegel's philosophy of mind offers, according to Taylor, two major ideas in which we can sense both Kant and the Romantics: the *first* idea is that of an embodied subject who, as *animal rationale*, is determined (following Kant) by the *activity* of thinking and also by the fact that, as an expressivist being, its thinking is a *medium* for the life's-process or, as we discover at the end of the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, the all pervasive Absolute Spirit⁶. Therefore, the spiritual life of the subject is an *embodied* one in the sense that it is the life of a thinking living being and also that its thinking exists only as expression⁷. Hegel's *second* major idea, on the other hand, is that reflexive consciousness manages to transform activity: if, according to Hegel, at first we are not aware of our biological and cultural dimensions, later on, as we grow (as history progresses), we can reach perfect self-consciousness⁸. This fully developed consciousness means

¹ IDEM, *Etica autenticității*, cit., pp. 37-38.

² IDEM, *Hegel and Modern Society*, cit., pp. 1-2.

³ IDEM, *Hegel*, cit., p. 17.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁶ IDEM, *Human Agency and Language...cit.*, pp. 85-86.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

that we realize that individual actions are rather *collective* ones (we are essentially members of a historically determined society) and, even more radically, we realize that as individuals we are defined as *vehicles* of an Absolute Spirit¹. According to his dialectical movement based on successive negations, Hegel thinks of his system as the historical synthesis between the Kantian moment and the Romantic one: all these moments prove to be nothing but late expressions of an Absolute Spirit that manifests itself in history and comes to self-consciousness through nothing else than Hegel's philosophy.

Another important source of inspiration for Taylor's view is the work of Martin Heidegger. In an article about Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Taylor thinks that one of their most important contributions in defining human identity is the idea of an "engaged" subject². Heidegger can talk about "finitude" only because he places his *Dasein* (human being) in the limits created by a world, body or language that precede him³; the self cannot decide whether to accept these limits or not (naturalist thinking makes us to unrealistically think that we can decide as individuals about everything that concerns us), but rather it has been thrown in their horizon by the "Being" itself. *Dasein* must accept its cultural horizon and become authentic by focusing, while taking in consideration the limit posed by its inevitable death, on those possibilities that prove to be the most creative ones⁴.

If Herder, Hegel or Heidegger all provide, with relatively minor adjustments, valuable ideas for a deep rethinking of human identity against the dominant scientific discourse, there are also other cultural figures that, even though they are related to expressivism, tend to develop a nihilistic perspective close at some point to naturalism. Nietzsche is perhaps one of the major challenges in this case. Taylor admits that Nietzsche's affirmation of life ("*Ja-sagen*") is not possible without the resources provided by Romantic expressivism (the vision of the unity between man and nature)⁵. Moreover, Nietzsche is, we could say, one of the most convincing advocates of authenticity providing, as Taylor notices in comparing him with his postmodernist followers, at least the ideal of the "*Übermensch*"⁶. But Taylor thinks, attacking Nietzsche with his own arguments that the creator of Zarathustra ends up exactly as his enemies: a nihilist. Nietzsche portrayals, partially following Schopenhauer in criticizing naive Romanticism, nature as an *amoral* force in which wills blindly clash without any kind of cosmic coordination that would integrate them in a harmonious plan. With Nietzsche Romanticism loses its innocence, biology comes in, brutally replacing old cosmic visions⁷. But Nietzsche's nihilism manifests itself most vividly in his rejection of the cultural background that provides our values: this background is tainted with the principles of a moral of slaves that weakens, through the ideas of benevolence or solidarity, the strong and creative individual⁸. This individual needs no such background that limits his creativity; instead he is able to radically recreate his life according to his own will to

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

² IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., pp. 61-62.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

⁴ Martin HEIDEGGER, *Ființă și timp*, Romanian transl. by G. Liiceanu and C. Cioabă, Editura Humanitas, București, 2003, p. 350.

⁵ Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 343.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 462.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

power. Values are, in this scenario, nothing but mere instruments in the hands of a will that wants only to manifest itself creatively.

Taylor believes that, unfortunately, Nietzsche's nihilistic vision has become popular, in present days, because of the so called postmodernists: Derrida, Foucault, or Lyotard. Romanticism agrees about the fact that expression makes things to be "brought-to-light" (there is always a cultural background that provides our meanings), but rejecting the idea of a pure order not involving manifestation; this premise is then radicalized and bringing-to-light becomes "bringing-about" (there is no cultural background providing our meanings, but only artificial creation)¹. It opens us at least two possibilities: we can say, as Nietzsche does, that the strong individual is his life's only creator, or we can say, following this time postmodernist thinking, that creativity is the product not of a subject, but of the language itself (language, in a strange formula, speaks the subject)².

Cultural Background and Habitus

Those theories which disconnect personal authenticity from cultural background are, in Taylor's vision, as dangerous as those having their source in naturalism: both move back and forwards between personal originality (*Übermensch*) or radical subjectivity (*ego cogito*) and impersonal instances (the language that speaks us) or radical objectivity (laws of nature). There is no, it seems, buffer zone that could prevent these excessive statements. But in fact, thinks Taylor, the *world* as a reality always *culturally* interpreted can give us the support for a more accurate perspective on our self: there is always an underlying relative *consensus* that later opens us, as we become more aware about this background, the possibility to see more clearly its tensions and bring, if necessary, changes according to our personal view about these things. Our *background* can secure some kind of consensus because we, as engaged human beings, acquire a socially transmitted *horizon* allowing us to make sense of our experiences and of the things around us³. Disengagement and (self-referential) authenticity are possible only by relating them to this large implicit/explicit cultural background against which these in fact react. Individualism is a cultural product and not something that transcends culture. We are, therefore, beings who are thrown (in order to use Heidegger's language) in the world, meaning also in history, language or in some moral space. The word "culture" can in fact, in close resonance with anthropology, bring all these together:

"I am evoking the picture of a plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices that define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like. These languages are often mutually untranslatable"⁴.

Cultures are, in a way, large-scale languages because only language can help us to make sense of our social goods, but also of the property and power relations. Extending language at such proportions means also that language is not reducible,

¹ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 117.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 68-69.

⁴ IDEM, *Two Theories of Modernity...cit.*, p. 1.

according to Taylor, only to reflective linguistic articulation; there are also *non-linguistic* languages (for example, body-language communicating through gestures, clothes etc., information about someone's social background) that underlie our non-reflective practices¹. Actually, linguistic articulation, in the sense of a reflective and explicit process of clarification, is predetermined by the background of our implicit practices. At first we go through a non-reflective process of internalization/embodiment of cultural values, only afterwards being able to more fully understand their meanings. Taylor names, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this first-order socialization: "*habitus*" ("values made flesh")². *Habitus* contains, therefore, our implicit knowledge of the world visible in our actions and that is socially transmitted from early stages. Linguistic articulations are (with some exceptions) attempts to bring to light this underlying knowledge, but never succeeding to reach absolute transparency: we manage only partially to express those cultural meanings incorporated in us as *habitus*. Moreover, expressing this background is not something that resembles perfect reproduction of an underlying reality, rather every expression means finding and creating: things partially change with every articulation of them.

Human beings, as self-interpreting animals, possess the capacity to use language in naming things which, in a deeper and radical manner, means to *evaluate* them "as things *worth* pursuing"³. Language is, therefore, the equivalent of producing distinctions: good/bad, important/trivial etc. Because of the language some things are more important than others. Taylor defines personal identity in direct relation to this capacity to live in a moral space:

"What this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary"⁴.

Moreover, "we are living beings, says Taylor, with these organs quite independently of our self-understandings or -interpretations, or the meanings things have for us. But we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good"⁵.

Following Harry Frankfurt, Taylor believes that human beings are the only beings having "second-order volitions": a person is not just a subject of desires, choices or deliberation (first-order volitions), but more profoundly a subject of wanting to be moved by first-order desires. Humans are, according to Frankfurt, the only beings capable of "reflective self-evaluation" meaning that we can suspend our ideals and goals in order to find an answer to a radical question such as: "Do I really want to be what I now am?"⁶. Taylor goes further and identifies two kinds of evaluation: the *first* is called "*weak*" because it covers trivial and contingent desires and the process of choosing between them (we can ask, for example: "Do I want to have chocolate or ice-cream?"), this kind of evaluation is directly

¹ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 107.

² *Ibidem*, p. 178.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁴ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 28.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁶ IDEM, "Responsibility for Self", in Amélie RORTY OKSENBERG (ed), *Identities of Persons*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, UK, 1976, p. 281.

linked to the naturalist view of a neutral world with no qualitative distinctions involved; the *second* is "strong" evaluation because it means dealing with substantive ideals that does not involve choosing between alternatives, I already know that one of them is more valuable than the other because I use a "contrastive language". If the "weak evaluator" goes from the fact that every desire has the same meaning for us, the "strong evaluator" knows that we have already evaluated our desires, some of them (honesty or courage etc.) being more valuable than others (to look good, to be admired etc.)¹. Therefore, weak evaluation can be resembled with Harry Frankfurt's first-order volitions and the strong evaluation with second-order volitions². In this sense, according to Taylor, only the strong evaluator has something we can call "depth" because he is not preoccupied with mere calculation between alternatives (as the weak evaluator), but rather with the development of a contrastive vocabulary that he must carefully articulate³.

Taylor defines (arguing in this way with those dominant modern trends that exclude the *content* of our ideals, reducing moral to neutral *procedures* that we must follow in order to prevent evil) the "Good" that structures moral space as follows:

"I have been speaking of the good in these pages, or sometimes of strong good, meaning whatever is picked out as incomparably higher in a qualitative distinction. It can be some action, or motive, or style of life, which is seen qualitatively superior. 'Good' is used here in a highly general sense, designating anything considered valuable, worthy, admirable, of whatever kind or category."⁴

But goods don't have the same status. Taylor identifies actually three major goods (sometimes confusingly close to each other): the *first* ones and also the least valuable in this hierarchy are "*life goods*". These are considered to be the goals and ideals that humans bring to light in order to define a "good life", as the ideal of an autonomous reason, or the ideal of expressive fulfillment⁵. The *second* ones and also the most valuable in Taylor's view are "*hypergoods*": "Goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about"⁶, as following God or searching justice. Finally, the third goods are "*constitutive goods*": "The constitutive good is a moral source, in the sense I want to use this term here: that is, it is a something the love of which empowers us to do and to be good"⁷. A constitutive good can be considered the Platonic order of being, or the later Christian God that replaced, in a way, Plato's Good.

If life goods refer to human ideals, hypergoods and constitutive goods represent something that transcend humans, are goods in themselves having a cultural background and people that believe in them. But hypergoods and constitutive goods seem sometimes almost undistinguishable. Hartmut Rosa proposed, in order to make things more clear, two kind of arguments: the *first* is a functional one: hypergoods must order and coordinate life, constitutive goods are, on the other hand,

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 282-287.

² *Ibidem*, p. 289.

³ IDEM, "Responsibility for Self", cit., pp. 287-288.

⁴ IDEM, *Sources of the Self*...cit., p. 92.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 63 and see also Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis*...cit., pp. 117-118.

⁶ IDEM, *Sources of the Self*...cit., p. 63.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

"moral sources"; the *second* argument is an ontological one: hypergoods have a superior ontological status because it is a value that subjects recognize as having importance for their lives, constitutive goods, on the other hand, can be valuable (as part of the implicit cultural background) without being recognized as such by humans¹.

The identity of the self is made out, according to Taylor, of two things closely related to each other: the values, or goods that allow us to select those things that matter to us in order to have a fulfilling life, but also our belonging to a cultural *community*². We usually identify ourselves with some kind of community or communities. Having a bi-cultural background, Taylor is well aware about the importance of culture and community and also about the need to be *recognized* by others in order to become a harmonious person. Our craving for recognition is something present in us from the early stages of our lives: we define ourselves, and here Taylor follows George Mead, in "webs of interlocution" meaning the fact that we understand ourselves at first through the linguistics interchanges with our parents or "significant others"³. Later on, we become able to consciously define our identity, but still never in isolation: discovering our identity means therefore that I negotiate it through a dialogue, partially open, partially internal with other people⁴. Even in solitude, I am not simply cut off from the rest of the world, but I continue, because of my linguistic nature, my dialogue with those who matter for me. Therefore, recognition, as something related to our basic need for face-to-face relationships, is rooted, according to Taylor's rather ambiguous definition, almost in our biological nature, in our ontogenetics⁵. Having such an anthropological importance, the logical consequence of it seems quite obvious: not having recognition can be disastrous for people's identity. The concept directly related to this crisis is "*alienation*", a term Taylor adopts from Hegel's vocabulary. But we believe that Taylor seems to admit the existence of two kinds of sources generating alienation: *on the one hand*, a person alienates itself when, following the path of atomist individualism common to liberal thinking, refuses to involve itself in public life by simply retreating in its private realm; *on the other hand*, alienation also comes when the community rejects those members who are too different according to the standards of common-sense normality. Regarding this second case, Taylor wrote a famous text on *multiculturalism: The Politics of Recognition* trying to offer a solution to the problem of how can we integrate people from other cultural backgrounds without causing them psychological traumas by our refusal to recognize their basic cultural identity. Taylor believes there are two different answers to the problem of "equal recognition". The *first* one, the politics of universalism, belongs to classical liberalism; this option guarantees the equal dignity of every individual in front of a universal, neutral law. The *second* answer, the politics of difference, is based on the equal respect of those different from us and it is rooted in another kind of liberalism coming from Hegel and recognizing the basic need for cultural identity⁶. Taylor maintains, therefore, that alienation cannot be overcome with the help of the liberal idea of a neutral State (States are in fact culturally biased, all we have to do is to maintain a cultural equilibrium in the

¹ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, pp. 117-119.

² Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 36.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 38-39.

⁴ IDEM, *Etica autenticității*, cit., p. 38.

⁵ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 38.

⁶ IDEM, "Politica recunoașterii", Romanian transl. by Al. Suter, *Secolul 20. Europele din Europa*, no. 10-12, 1999, pp. 491-518.

coordination of the State) or with the strong distinction between *public* and *private*. Regarding the last point, Taylor thinks we should have the right, because of our social and expressive nature, to freely express our identities in public without casting them (schizophrenically) to the intimacy of our private world.

Historically speaking, the old pattern of securing a socio-cultural consensus is represented, according to Taylor's narrative, by a hierarchical order usually having a strong religious and metaphysical background as in the case of Greek culture and, later, Christianity. The beginnings of modernity (17th century) radically question this cosmological pattern. There are two important moments in this change: the *first* is the emergence of what Taylor names the idea of a "personal commitment" having its origin in the Reform and meaning the necessity of a consciously made personal agreement in order to build a community (at first, a Christian community). Previously, the social consensus was established by a community accepted as being something natural, but in 17th century emerges another view saying that individuals are more basic than community and that in fact, as in the case of contractualist theories anticipating liberalism, every community is the product of a contract between rational and free agents¹. Community is not anymore a given, or a substance, but something *created*. The *second* moment of the above mentioned change is the focus on "ordinary life", or, as Taylor understands it, the two human dimensions involved in it: "production" (work) and "reproduction" (sexuality, marriage, family)². The modern sensitivity reacts against the cosmological and social hierarchy emphasizing instead ordinary processes. Later on, the Enlightenment radicalizes this anti-hierarchical view and defines human beings in a utilitarian manner as natural beings seeking for physical pleasure³. Romanticism, on the other hand, draws a different image, even though it inherits the spirit of the changes mentioned above: humans are definable only by harmoniously placing them in a natural and cultural order, but, in contrast with the old hierarchy, nature and culture are something that can be expressed only through individuals. Nature is not so much a cosmic order, but more the way it "resonates" in us⁴. One step further, Hegel is the one who makes a spectacular synthesis between Enlightenment and Romanticism offering his own version of the relationship between individual and his environment. Taylor notices the powerful Hegelian concept of "*Sittlichkeit*" ("ethical substance") meaning the set of obligations we have to follow in order to preserve a society based on Idea (Absolute Spirit). *Sittlichkeit* has a concrete meaning, it refers to the moral obligations we have in a specific community to which we belong, therefore, this concept offers Hegel the semantic connotation needed in order to express the unity between *Sollen* (duty) and *Sein* (being) avoiding in this way the Kantian "*Moralität*" based on a gap between the formal laws of morality and our sensual nature⁵. According to Taylor, in Hegel's philosophy:

"The State or the community has a higher life; its parts are related as the parts of an organism. Thus the individual is not serving an end separate from

¹ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, pp. 193-195.

² *Ibidem*, p. 211.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 327.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 299.

⁵ IDEM, *Hegel and Modern Society*, cit., p. 83.

him; rather he is serving a larger goal which is the ground of his identity, for he only is the individual he is in this larger life"¹.

This close relation with community is menaced by the danger of alienation: "This comes about when the public experience of my society ceases to have any meaning for me"². But community is based, according to Hegel, on another important social process: *recognition*. Taylor's account regarding this concept identifies it with the emergence of modern world: the decay of the old value of "honour", based on social hierarchy (honour is valuable because not everybody possesses it), by its replacement with the egalitarian and democratic value of "dignity" and also the newly born ideal of authenticity focusing on subjectivity, all these generate a state of all pervasive insecurity³. Identity and recognition are something we reflect upon, massively more than we did before, because from now on these are not something socially given: as moderns, we have to struggle both for the identity we want to express and for the underlying recognition of it. This also relates to another feature of modern world: the existence of a *plurality of values*. The growing complexity of modern culture undermines the possible consensus about our values, generating, in the same time, more insecurity concerning identity⁴. The 20th century modernist view of man assumes, as a result of this growing complexity, something radical that Enlightenment or Romanticism would have rejected as pathological: the fact that our identity is defined as a multiple one often having in its texture conflictive dimensions⁵.

Beside the influence of Romantic expressivism and Hegel's philosophy, Taylor is also indebted to phenomenology: Husserl emphasizes, as a fundamental feature of human mind, intentionality and related to it the "life-world" we inhabit (a life-world close to a cultural understanding, rather than a naturalist one)⁶. Heidegger takes some of Husserl's ideas and places them radically in a historical horizon: we are, according to Heidegger's story, beings living in a socio-historical world and having a language that clarifies our basic cultural background incorporated in our ordinary practices. Taylor is also impressed by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty especially because of his concern for our body, and also, in a more significant manner, by the German philosopher (Heidegger's disciple) Hans Georg Gadamer. The hermeneutics developed by Gadamer, focusing on language, dialogue, tradition, culture or the (slightly utopian) possibility of a "fusion of horizons" (our different cultural interpretations can, through small steps of suspending our rigid cultural position, create a common ground for a consensual dialogue), allows Taylor to more convincingly reconstruct Hegel's vision by rejecting his bombastic idea of an Absolute Spirit wandering the history and by keeping, in the same time, Hegel's more valuable intuitions: the socio-cultural nature of our identity, the need for recognition, the importance of language and so on⁷.

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

² *Ibidem*, p. 88.

³ IDEM, *Etica autenticității*, cit., p. 37-38.

⁴ IDEM, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, pp. 498-499.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 480-481

⁶ IDEM, *Hegel and Modern Society*, cit., pp. 161-162.

⁷ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, p. 43.

Conclusion. Hierarchy and Rhythm

Surely, Taylor is not an author that agrees to some kind of value-free, dispassionate stance regarding the tensions of the modern world, these frictions are not pure differences produced by a complex society and history that we simply must embrace or technically resolve without any kind of moral reaction to them. Contrary to his postmodernist or naturalist opponents, Taylor speaks about deep value crises, or "malaises" that we must fight even though there is no final victory assured in this matter. The major modern portrayals of the self hide, as we mentioned at the beginning of this text, some potential or actual crises closely intertwined: (a) the rationalist and instrumentalist description of the self leads, as Taylor often mentions, in most cases to atomism in which individuals are freed from the deep community ties envisioning themselves as almost self-referential beings. The relative consensus around the Enlightenment's idea of a universally distributed capacity of reasoning becomes often challenged when individual perspectives (worlds), following their specific interests, collide. Beside this abstract consensus there is no other external, more concrete reference to stop disengaged selves to engage in cynical battles for supremacy and survival; (b) the Nietzschean and post-modernist stories of the self also generate serious problems: the self ends up whether on the heights of creativity, totally disconnected from his community, or as a humble instrument of a difference-generating discourse. But the meaninglessness, the ego-loss of modern self remains, according to Taylor, unresolved as long as authenticity and expressivity is not connected to a cultural background; (c) finally, the communitarian description offers, in Taylor's view, a better version, but a version always menaced, most visibly in Hegel's case with his Absolute Spirit, by alienation and conformism.

Taylor thinks we can fight these problems through a better definition of the self and also by a sustained effort of bringing to light those values that have deeply shaped our views of the self. As self-interpreting animal, the human being has a body and also the capacity of articulating, through language, a partial self-understanding. But this self-understanding makes sense only by relating it to a cultural background structured as a moral space: a human being is a strong evaluator always considering some things (offered by its background) more important than others. But we think that at this point, tensions arise: Taylor is vulnerable to powerful critics because of his seemingly inconsistent story about the relation between strong values, on one hand, and tolerance, on the other¹. Let us have a closer look on this matter. Taylor's major problem concerning the self is a very old one, originating in Aristotle: how can we bring the diversity of goods under the unity of a life². This problem becomes more urgent in modern world: Taylor tells us that we, contrary to our predecessors, are living in a society with an extended "social imaginary" defined by a plurality of values often conflictive each other. The old hierarchical world with one strong value (usually God) (more or less) harmoniously including the others seems entirely gone. Aristotle solved, for example, the tension

¹ Mark READHEAD, *Thinking and Living Deep Diversity*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, 2002, p. 3. Readhead thinks that Taylor is not capable to solve the problem of combining his catholic belief consisting in substantive ideals and his idea of cultural tolerance expressed in a multicultural State.

² *Ibidem*, p. 121.

between unity and difference through a hierarchy originating in external universe: some faculties (i.e., reason) are more important than others because there is a cosmological order mirroring in ourselves. But we, as moderns, cannot simply adopt the same model because we would reject equality or democracy as basic value defining us and also we would question the process of individuation so deeply rooted in our culture. We believe that Taylor is actually in a very unpleasant position because, *on one hand*, he says: human beings are strong evaluators both finding and creating hierarchical orders by considering some things more important than others; *on the other hand*, Taylor is aware that this basic (almost universal) feature of the human being is put to the test by a modernity that brings a plurality of values passionately rejecting hierarchy. What is the solution? We argue in fact that Taylor tries to replace the old rigid hierarchical model with a more flexible one (still having its tensions) that we would like to call *rhythmic*. There are several aspects, we think, that prove this replacement:

a) Even though he is highly suspicious about the image of a disengaged self who suspended everything around him in order to discover its neutral consciousness, Taylor thinks there is still a way in which we can radically suspend our values without nevertheless ending up in a meta-language (as naturalism does).

"In re-evaluations the most basic terms, those in which other evaluations are carried on, are precisely what is in question. It is just because all formulations are potentially under suspicion of distorting their objects that we have to see them all as revisable, that we are forced back, as it were, to the inarticulate limit from which they originate"¹.

This procedure is related to our basic quality as the only beings having second-order volitions. We can radically revise our values because we can question them. We think that one of Taylor's inconsistencies lies exactly in this point: he tells us that second-order volitions that make possible *radical re-evaluation* are a basic feature of being human but, in the same time, he implicitly admits that this process of re-evaluation is a predominantly modern phenomenon². We question our values because we are more insecure about them than our forebears. Taylor would argue saying that re-evaluation is in fact always present but is brought to light (made explicit) in times of crises (as in modernity). Anyway, the important thing is for us to notice that radical re-evaluation rejects a rigid hierarchy, emphasizing revisability and change in our value-system.

b) Another feature that, according to us, proves the switch from a rigid hierarchy to a soft, rhythmic one is originated in the way Taylor understands expressivist tradition: by accepting Aristotle's philosophical pattern of something potential that comes to light according to its *telos*, the Romantics reject, in the same time, the idea of a preexistent form, the final product is not something inscribed in external order, but is the result of the expressive effort of an individual. Hierarchies are not so much external, but *internal*. Cultures create only a value-horizon, but the individual has the responsibility to recombine the values according to its personal

¹ Charles TAYLOR, "Responsibility for Self", cit., p. 297.

² We believe that Taylor is also vulnerable because of his predominantly hermeneutical assumptions: Habermas's critique against Gadamer on the ground of his blindness to social inequalities and power relations that distort communication can also be addressed to Taylor. His overly optimistic view about culture covers the political and social pressures that in fact can badly damage our chance of being authentic or sensitive to our community's problems.

needs¹. If the Romantics still believe in the unity of man, nature and society, Modernists preserve the idea of a balance between personal and transpersonal rejecting, in the same time, the vision of a possible unity:

“The Modernists’ multileveled consciousness is thus frequently ‘decentred’: aware of living on a transpersonal rhythm which is mutually irreducible in relation to the personal. But for all that it remains inward; and is the first only through being the second. The two features are inseparable”².

c) Taylor is also well aware that the complexity of the modern world requires a *multiple identity* of the self. Talking about Modernists, Taylor notices that they already developed this “awareness of living on a duality or plurality of levels, not totally compatible, but which can’t be reduced to unity”³. Taylor’s version follows mostly the same path: he believes, for example, that multiculturalism is possible only if we accept the idea of a “deep diversity” opened towards both collective and individual rights by promoting both tolerance and commonality⁴. This is also the reason why Taylor, despite his religious background, believes that the democratic ideal of tolerance comes first. (Nevertheless, he tries to connect religion and democratic tolerance by using the Christian value of “*agapē*”, or *charity* based on God’s love for human beings⁵.) Moreover, the nature of a free society is not the state of freezing in some kind of order, but rather the “*lotta continua*” meaning the fight between the higher and lower forms of liberty, no part ever being able to wholly destroy the other part⁶.

d) Taylor also believes, bringing a final argument for a more rhythmic vision, that ideals, despite their absolute requirements, can be limited in their (self)-destructive tendency by only admitting their inevitably *partial* actualization. Ideals are cultural and historical products. There is no absolute transparency, but only a relative capacity to make things more clear than before.

Having all these in mind, we can say that Taylor’s formula of personal identity is, despite the basic need for hierarchy coming from evaluation, not something frozen, but rather a flexible hierarchy of values sensitive to the differences introduced by *contexts*. Perhaps communitarians are somehow right that we can still learn something from Aristotle: defining *phronesis* (practical reason) the ancient philosopher was careful enough to say that this reason does not mean a doctrine that we literally have to follow regardless the situations, but rather a kind of wisdom flexibly adapting itself to the never wholly predictable social contexts⁷.

¹ Hartmut ROSA, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis...cit.*, p. 186.

² Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 481.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 480.

⁴ Mark READHEAD, *Thinking and Living...cit.*, p. 2.

⁵ Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self...cit.*, p. 410, p. 516.

⁶ IDEM, *Etica autenticității*, cit., p. 56.

⁷ IDEM, *Philosophical Arguments*, cit., p. 177.