Charles Taylor and a Hermeneutical Understanding of Meaningfulness

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Summary

Meaningfulness is generally considered essential to human life. What meaningfulness implies, however, is difficult to delineate. In this paper, we focus on the philosophy of Charles Taylor and his account of hermeneutics. We discern important components of meaningfulness: situatedness, orientatedness and articulacy are necessary to understand the world as horizontal rather than flattened. Meaningfulness is also related to our capacity to take a step back and look at our lives from a distance.

Introduction

It is not easy to articulate thoughts on the meaning of life because its significance is largely ramified into broader terms such as spirituality, atheism, or religion, having different meanings for different people. Yet most people acknowledge that there is a something in there - some meaning - that is crucial for everyday life. Without a broader sense of meaning, a nihilist turn seems all too close. In this paper we want to indicate what is decisive about meaning. We will not discuss the so-called Meaning of Life but rather explore what may contribute to making life more meaningful. It is not possible to provide ready-made formulas, but only general principles that can serve as guidance. The philosophy of Charles Taylor works with this point. We start from his ideas to articulate our phenomenological background in a way that allows us to perceive some of the key components of meaningfulness. We believe that Taylor's conception of the self and of meaning not only criticises the modern-day understanding of self and world, but also opens up the possibility for questioning meaning and identity. Furthermore, we think Taylor's hermeneutical approach is indispensable

when talking about meaning.

Most people raised in Western culture will be inclined to agree that meaningfulness in human life is essential, desirable and possible, even when no universally valid answers can be given to the question of what kind of human life is truly meaningful or valuable. It generally follows from this that in order to pursue a life that corresponds best to one's own personal tastes and preferences, as much freedom as possible should be granted. This is one of the strong points in Western thought, a heritage from the Enlightenment project. Along with it came the malaise of modern times as a consequence of a perverted focus on this personal freedom and the rise of a ubiquitous instrumental reason that overshadowed other moral options like common values and norms stemming from the belief in a good community. The maximisation of personal freedom has now become problematic and the individual is blamed for being greedy. It is an unintended outcome of the once praised ideals of the Enlightenment. These same dynamics have the profound impact of narrowing down the range of our moral understandings of the self and, by extension, the world. However, Taylor argues, modernity brings at the same time a very potent and crucial evolution in modern society. People nowadays not only have the right to live their lives the way they want, but they can also make conscious decisions based on their own judgments and convictions. Furthermore, there is an increasing drive to lay down these rights in national and international legislation. Although Taylor does not deny that modern society is in crisis, he above all sees the potential which modernity still has to offer.

In his various writings, Taylor analyses this condition, pointing out that although it is problematic, it offers moral possibilities on a more fundamental level. His works offer an extensive discussion of the historical context of the modern moral of authenticity, but they also criticise the ubiquitous and individualist liberal ideology. In *Sources of the Self*, still his main work in this regard, Taylor starts off describing an implicit moral framework from which we cannot escape. He wishes to explore this background of our moral and spiritual intuitions. This is no easy task because of "a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe, even pride themselves on believing, on one hand, and what they need to make sense of some of their moral reactions, on the

other".[1] This gap represents a contemporary view, in which moral ontology is considered irrelevant.

It is Taylor's claim, however, that there is a great deal of suppression of morality in modern-day society. He wants to retrieve this moral ontology and indicates that life is always already immersed in meaning: "doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us".[2] Even the naturalist[3] attempt to sideline these frameworks finds its starting point in a specific meaningful horizon. As such, they are not at all optional or subjective, but rather constitutive of human agency.

Morality according to Taylor is thus not only defined in terms of respect for others, as has traditionally been the case. It necessarily involves *issues of strong evaluation* that bring about a crucial set of *qualitative distinctions*. This is why Taylor, with a sense of respect for and obligation to others, incorporates two other axioms inherent in morality: our understanding of what makes a full life and notions concerned with our own dignity, our sense of ourselves. That way, morality for Taylor is linked with meaningfulness and the way we perceive ourselves, our self-understanding. It has thorough implications for the way we identify ourselves.

What concerns us most is the view that these frameworks inspire or orientate and that they have a horizontal nature. We follow Taylor when he argues that moral orientation is closely linked with our understanding of ourselves. "To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about 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] Taylor's answer to the question "Who am I / Who are we?" resembles the Socratic "Know thyself" in as much as it refers to the webs of strong evaluation we are always already immersed in.

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[1] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 9.

[2] Ibid, p. 27.

[3] According to Taylor, naturalism and utilitarianism try to reject all qualitative distinctions in favour of an objectivist point of view. It should be clear that Taylor opposes to this thesis.

[4] Ibid, p. 28.

Discussions of identity and self-understanding are firmly rooted in today's hegemonic discourse, which largely ignores the depth of our embeddedness in a web of meaning. It is important therefore, to indicate how it is that a "self" is understood. We believe a hermeneutical approach is indispensable here, without making ontological claims. We concur with Taylor when he describes the condition of human existence in terms of *changing* and *becoming* rather than being. He understands life as an unfolding story: "*we grasp our lives in a narrative*".[5] According to Taylor, a narrative does not merely structure our present. It presupposes understanding ourselves in an inescapable temporal structure. Indeed, this is the only way it is possible for us to know ourselves. Only through the history of our maturations and regressions, victories, and defeats can we understand ourselves. It is a structural feature of a self to see its life by means of a narrative, existing in an orientated space of meanings. Thus, the society one lives in, brings forth a specific set of meanings. As already stated, however, we think modern-day society brings about a limited conception of meanings. Marcuse's description of the *one-dimensional man* still seems to give a good account of how modern-day thought and behaviour is set in a limited web of meanings.[6] A common picture of the self is largely based on ignoring our embeddedness in webs of narrativity. Hence, Taylor correctly suggests that from a modern discourse we cannot know the self. "To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn't in principle be an answer".[7] We agree with Taylor that the self is defined by the way the self interprets itself in a space and regards life as meaningful. It is not possible to escape the socio-cultural interpretative dimension that determines our thinking, acting and feeling.

In no way can we attain an objective account of the self, for this self is inherently bound by the interpretational space it moves in. Language then, becomes of utmost importance. And because language can exist only within

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[5]   Ibid, p. 48.

[6]   Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial* Society (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

[7]   Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 34.

a community, a self always already presupposes the other and an awareness of common meaning. It is through others, through a common space, that a self can learn what is meaningful and what is not. To indicate that a self can never be without any reference to what surrounds it, Taylor speaks of *webs of interlocution*. The thesis of interlocution refers to the idea that the definition of an identity not only involves a personal stand on moral matters, but also a stand of the community the person lives in. To know what is meaningful is to acknowledge the shared nature of it. A self can never be without any reference to what surrounds it.

Modern-day society, however, has "developed conceptions of individualism which picture the human person as, at least potentially, finding his or her own bearings within, declaring independence from the webs of interlocution which have originally formed him/her, or at least neutralizing them".[8] From such a standpoint, the only way the web can be thought of is as being "at our disposal" with people conceiving themselves as able to choose from a range of frameworks. More generally, it forms part of a larger idea that implicitly presumes that it is people who assign importance to words, concepts and acts. Hence, the self has become "too large" and the world "too small".

We believe it is here that we have to situate the experience of loss of meaning. Perceiving ourselves as detached from the web of interlocution results in an overwhelming ubiquity of the first assumption and the narrowing down or the covering up of possible meanings of the second. In the following we will articulate this web in another way, making it possible to emphasise other aspects.

Situatedness and orientatedness in the horizons

As mentioned, along with Taylor we depart from the standpoint that the world has conceptually become flattened. This refers to the world as conceived in terms of the here-and-now level of action and thought, in terms of the visible and the knowable and, in a sense, of something that is well-delineated and graspable. Taylor therefore retrieves this existing but

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[8]   Ibid, p. 36.

neglected and ignored moral background, or moral horizon, as part of our *social imaginaries* that is the "largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have".[9] As he continually demonstrates, retrieving this horizon is inherently related with self-understanding and meaningfulness. Again, for the sake of meaningfulness, to know who you are means being oriented in moral space and being able to distinguish between what is relevant and what is trivial. There is a thorough mutual relation between our self-understanding and our background-understanding. They render each other possible.

Taylor emphasises the importance of the webs of interlocution as a starting point while his main discourse concerns the ethical horizon or background. From the perspective of meaningfulness we reframe this web of interlocution, not only focusing on the ethical horizon, but articulating this social embeddedness also in terms of a social horizon. Moreover, we think there is scope for considering a third horizon, which is nature. It should be understood, however, that these three horizons are thoroughly interlaced and together constitute what should be regarded as a phenomenological background. Although this three-fold distinction should rather be seen as purely theoretical, it can help to make us aware of their specific meanings and scope. Furthermore, it opens the possibility to criticise the modern naturalist discourse, which no longer conceives the ethical, social and natural elements as horizons or backgrounds. They have come to be perceived as flattened, as non-dimensional, as environments which are "out there", at a distance beyond our reach. For individuals to find meaningfulness, however, it is more fruitful to acknowledge their "horizontal" nature and give it a place in our social imaginaries. The possibility of perceiving a horizontal aspect is linked with the possibility of experiencing situatedness and orientatedness within these environments, which is an important factor in generating meaning. Again, this is not an optional matter; we are already embedded and cannot get out of this

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[9]   Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durkham, London: Duke University Press: Public Planet Books, 2004).

common space. We need to be aware of our place in it, and what this place means to us. Taylor compares it with finding our way on a map; we are lost in a place if we are ignorant of the land around us, not knowing its important locations or their relation to each other. But we are also lost if we do not know how to place ourselves on that map. If we see the moral horizon, the social horizon, and the natural horizon as flat, we may be ignoring our place on that map. We will therefore focus on the potential of these frameworks to inspire and orient, without ignoring how people continuously reshape this framework.

Stating that the horizons in which we are embedded are important for meaningfulness needs some clarification. The common-sense perspective of our world as knowable and controllable, or flattened and one-dimensional, is generally accompanied by the idea that it is we who introduce meaning to the world since the world, in its objectified and disenchanted form, has no longer meaning in itself. However, once our eyes are opened to the horizontal reality of nature, the social world and the moral world will make us aware, against mainstream thinking, that meaning is not just a unilateral process. It breaks up the singularity of one-dimensionalism. The key aspect of this whole process is the change of direction: instead of supposedly being "at our disposal", the world, through forms of inescapable horizons, can *touch* us. Being touched and touching are two sides of the same coin, in the sense that it is not just we who unilaterally relate to the world. The possibility of being touched refers to the mutuality of our relation with the world. We are not independent of the world but interrelate with it. Being touched then, means to be open towards what is outside of us. It is exactly this which Taylor means by retrieving the moral frameworks in which we are situated. A good example can be found in strong feelings about things that we feel merit respect. According to Taylor, our moral reactions spring not only from a *gut feeling*,[10] but also from the implicit acknowledgment of moral claims. It is not us who claim this, it is something that escapes us. It is something we cannot obtain any objective knowledge about. In rejecting the naturalist and utilitarian point of view, Taylor criticises the possibility of an

[10]   Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 7.

objective account of meaningfulness. Although he does not go that far, other authors such as Arnold Burms and Herman Dedijn[11] describe this escaping element to be crucial for meaningfulness: in order for something to be experienced as meaningful, a part of what makes it qualify as meaningfulness must escape our objectifying capacity.

Burms and Dedijn describe the different structures of what they call a cognitive interest and a meaningful interest. In an ideal situation, knowledge consists of an *aedequatio* between the act of knowing and the object of knowing, between consciousness and that which we want to grasp using our consciousness. By contrast, in the structure of meaningfulness this *aedequatio* is ideally never reached, the object touching us necessarily escapes our cognition, making the distance between both consciousness and the object unbridgeable. The experience of meaningfulness resides in a tense relationship between the objectively knowable and the aspects which by nature escape us. Hence, and Taylor would concur, it is impossible to understand meaningfulness in objective, cognitive terms. However, modern-day society perceives man as independent of the inescapable framework Taylor speaks of. This fosters the one-dimensionality of the contemporary western worldview. There seems to be no horizontal awareness. Society, in its form of a depersonalised institution, seems very much representable by the mind, creating the impression that we have control over ourselves and our world. As Burms and Dedijn would state it, and Taylor as well, such a view of society is based on a cognitive and objective interest and results in a detached stance.

To sense the multi-dimensional nature of reality, we need to become aware of our social situatedness. Such kind of experiences can be reinforced in different ways. In Belgium and other countries they are actively stimulated, for instance through community activities. It comes down to understanding or grasping in one way or another the larger frameworks we live in. Once we have achieved this community embeddedness it is no longer a unilateral affair but rather an experience of being touched by the

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[11]   Arnold Burms and Herman Dedijn, *De Rationaliteit en haar Grenzen. Kritiek en Deconstructie*. (Leuven: Leuven, Universitaire Pers, Assen:Van Gorcum, 1986).

things that surround us. In a subtle way, this realisation of the social horizon, this "discovery" of the social horizon, will create a feeling of belonging, of being part of, of being situated. On a modest scale, it may also start us changing our perspectives of society and its meaningfulness. In a very literal sense, the social horizon can make us aware of an additional part of reality we had not noticed before. We find that there is a more meaningful world.

Taylor provides a comparable example of this (re-)discovery [12] of the social background and its inherent meaningfulness when differentiating the respect we feel for a deceased person from things that we consider are at our disposal: the question of death or dying is always embedded in what Taylor calls an ontological discourse. These discourses attempt to articulate why we feel it is a natural thing to respect a deceased person. The concern here is not whether the narrative is true. The issue is rather that these narratives seek to conceptually underpin certain moral issues that are felt as having an ontological status. Peoples and cultures have tried to articulate this moral experience time and again, which is, needless to say, a profoundly human source of inspiration.

In this respect, Taylor emphasises yet another point: the fact that being touched by something refers to *a pre-articulate understanding*[13] in the first place, an experience we try to articulate only afterwards. Taylor characterises this hermeneutical power with regard to the qualitative distinctions of our moral framework as follows: "They function as an orienting sense of what is important, valuable, or commanding, which emerges in our particulate intuitions about how we should act, feel, and respond on different occasions, and on which we draw when we deliberate

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[12] Burms explains being touched in terms of discovering: once we are touched, we sense a proximity of the object, but we likewise experience that it is escaping us. This is what makes up meaningfulness. The proximity Burms speaks of could be described as follows: being touched probably occurred because a person recognised implicitly that the horizontal nature of society provoked respect. Once a person (re-)discovers that he provokes respect, he can become meaningful.

[13] This is the core of what we have been calling hermeneutics.

about ethical matters".[14] Articulation also is a very important aspect regarding morality and meaningfulness. According to Taylor it is through articulating that we find the sense of life: articulating our qualitative distinctions is articulating what underlies our ethical choices. In articulation we set out the point of our moral actions and explain their meaning in a fuller and richer way. The experience and articulation of the social background may result in what Taylor describes as feeling this "mode of life as incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us".[15]

To argue that this phenomenological background, represented in this article as ethical, social and natural horizons, can be discovered and is meaningful to us, is one thing. But the question arises: how we can know, when attempting to articulate this background, what is meaningful or makes most sense? According to Taylor, the requirements we need will not be "met if we have some theoretical language which purports to explain behaviour from the observer's standpoint but is of no use to the agent in making sense of his own thinking, feeling, and acting".[16] The language in which we express ourselves has to be meaningful as well. Language in that sense is not only explanatory. Moreover, Taylor is convinced that it is the possibility to articulate that gives meaning and makes sense. What makes sense then, refers to a search for narratives and questions that give the *best account*. It would seem that Taylor here takes a rather pragmatist approach in so far as he integrates this making sense into the personal narrative as a kind of personal resonance. It has to do with arguing and establishing that one view is *better* than another. To define what better means, he evidently does not refer to a naturalist epistemology. For Taylor, the best account has nothing to do with neutralising our anthropocentric reactions. Rather, it is some kind of pragmatic reasoning on transitions. It is not related with any model of practical reasoning rooted in the epistemological tradition that constantly pushes us towards mistrust of transitions. In Taylor's pragmatic reasoning,

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[14] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* p. 78.
[15] Ibid, p. 19.
[16] Ibid, p. 57.

we do not have to look for criteria or considerations that are decisive. He refers to a perspective that is defined by our moral intuitions, by which we are *touched*. The best account is connected with our being touched by something in a complex way. It has to do with seeing things as infinitely valuable.

Refusing senselessness

In Section 1 above we first emphasised the need for broader self-understanding based on a changed awareness of the world around us, a horizontal world instead of a one-dimensional world, the need to be touched again and hence to become aware of our embeddedness so as to achieve a broadened view of ourselves. We are convinced that Taylor's philosophy opens up the possibility to consider this broadening. We then focused on the importance of articulating this experience, and on the question how to legitimate that these horizons make sense. We had to take a step back to allow proper reflection. Now we turn to the possibilities and constraints of taking a step back, and what this implies for meaningfulness.

As Taylor states, modern-day society has enabled us as individuals to enjoy genuine personal freedom. In addition to our embeddedness, we have our own aspirations. We wish to make particular choices that are an integral part of larger activities; we have our priorities in the broadest sense and strive towards becoming certain beings. Yet there is another peculiar characteristic that cannot be separated from meaningfulness. As Taylor indicates, it is the very possibility for people to actually *doubt* whether there is meaning to life.[17] This doubt, however, does not involve a negation of meaning but rather its confirmation. On this point, we can find an answer in the works of authors such as Thomas Nagel. He provides a more in-depth elucidation of the possibility of regarding as arbitrary everything that we take seriously, and makes pertinent suggestions on how to cope with this internal mechanism of creating absurdity or meaninglessness. The point, he says, is not to eradicate the factors that provoke meaninglessness but to decrease their legitimating quality to more modest proportions.

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[17]   Ibid, p. 16.

So, what then could be absurdity or meaninglessness? According to Nagel, it is the fact that we are faced with two inescapable and mutually conflicting points of view, one from within and another from without. As mentioned before, people have the particularity of taking their own life quite seriously, whether or not this is justified, and putting enormous amounts of time and energy into the important and irrelevant alike, which range from self-knowledge enhancement, emotional honesty, reflection on family ties and other relationships, to haircuts, clothing, and football. Yet, next to this, humans have that "special capacity to step back and survey themselves"[18] and to become spectators of their own lives, seeing themselves as one of countless possible forms of life. For Nagel, however, it is not the fact that we are capable of this that makes life absurd but the fact that we do so while continuing to take our concerns seriously. This detachment, which undermines our commitment without actually destroying it, makes us feel divided. The sense of absurdity or division is a consequence of this collision within our selves, not of any collision between our expectations and the world. But, as Nagel argues, since it is a collision within ourselves, there may also be a possibility to adjust it, albeit not to overcome it. We have to know where to stop objectifying. To stop objectifying could be understood as trying to leave behind altogether the objective view, which requires justifications. Yet, this is not feasible. We just cannot do so, for in observing we never take a new vantage point that allows us to discern the significant; quite the contrary, the detached view is an essential part of the self, situated within a phenomenological horizon.

This stance evokes a parallel with Taylor. Both authors, influenced by Heidegger, know that an objectifying stance cannot lead to a God's-eye view, or total abstraction of the context. This is precisely what Taylor criticises in naturalist and utilitarian discourse. Objectification of our own life and life in general may run the risk of leaving value behind altogether and bordering on indifference with regard to our own life and that of others, or nihilism. This is why Taylor argues it is so important to acknowledge the

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[18]   Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 15.

framework we are embedded in. It is only in this way, he argues, that life's phenomena can retain their specific value.

Hence, in suggesting that we have to know where to stop, Nagel, following Williams, refers to giving this outer perspective less importance, for we can wonder if it makes sense at all to seek justifications outside our own life. We can put this view in proportion by starting and ending in the middle of things.[19] Nagel might be right when claiming that the internal view should resist "the reduction to a subjective interpretation of its contents which the external view tries to force on it".[20] Both have merit and should be put into balance. Hence, this possibility to create senselessness and our determination to refuse its outcome in its larger form should be seen as important components of meaningfulness and self-understanding.

This possibility to objectify to a certain extent our own lives while likewise being in it also has implications for a renewed awareness of our phenomenological background, which we have articulated and made graspable in this article in the form of horizons such as the natural horizon, the social, cultural and historical horizon, and the ethical horizon. This inherent dividedness along inner and outer lines reveals that we are not obliged to follow the detached view (as one part of ourselves) making the world one-dimensional and our relations unilateral. We do not have to take this outer view and its justification to be the one and only right and legitimate answer. Instead, we can seriously consider our subjective experience of being touched, our inner view that is disclosing a multi-dimensionality, a depth in nature and in our social environment. As Taylor also states, much that is of value can be understood only from an internal perspective. We have to understand this as well when taking the external perspective.

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[19]   Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 214.
[20]   Thomas Nagel, Ibid, p. 218.