

Talk on the banking crisis, for a master class in Philosophy in The Hague, June 6, 2013.

Rediscovering our authentic self:

Charles Taylor on the malaise of modernity

Emanuel Rutten

Is the banking crisis an economic crisis? The answer to this question is undoubtedly yes, of course the banking crisis is an economic crisis. But in my opinion not exclusively, and probably not in the first place. Based on the thinking of Charles Taylor, I would like to show that the banking crisis can essentially be seen as a moral crisis, just like the many other crises overshadowing our times. From this more fundamental perspective, it requires above all, as I will argue, a deeper change in mentality, grounded in a reflection on ourselves, not just technical and organizational adjustments to our economic system.

In his book *Sources of the self*, Taylor departs from a hermeneutic vision of man. As humans we are always involved in the world in which, as Martin Heidegger would say, we are thrown. We can never stand outside it. In order to know which direction to take, we familiarize ourselves with our environment. We do this through interpretation. Man is after all primarily an interpretative being. Interpretation is paramount for our existence: interpretation of our self, of others and the world we live in. All our thoughts, experiences and actions are therefore always interpretative thoughts, experiences and actions. By interpreting our self, others and the world, we bring direction and structure to our lives. In this way each of us creates a life story, a frame of reference for understanding and dealing with the world we have been thrown into.

No-one can be without a narrative framework of interpretation. Without embracing a vision of life, we would not be able to bring harmony to our lives. Nor would we be able to form an identity, which is in

fact crucial for every human being. Therefore sometime in their lives, everyone is almost unnoticeably seeking a particular worldview. This is inevitable. We cannot help it.

Thus a life orientation story forms the harmonious framework within which a person can understand and shape their life. Alongside a cognitive image of the nature of the world that transcends what is empirically observable, a person always has embedded in their frame of reference a certain moral vision of life, about what we should do and aim for in this world. Life orientation stories are therefore existential wholes of both cognitive beliefs as well as practical precepts.

Thus a worldview is not a professional scientific theory. We shape a narrative orientation framework through interpretive dealings with the world, not by forming a scientific theory. Choosing a life orientation story to identify our self, others and the world always *precedes* a theoretical scientific reflection. Our ultimate choice of perspective on life is based on what we learn, perceive and experience in our lives, not by formulating theories and empirically testing specific academic hypotheses.

In this context, Charles Taylor speaks of a *best account*. To discover our personal identity, we ultimately choose the interpretation framework that suits us best. Creating a personal identity presupposes a moral orientation, an orientation as to what we consider good and worth aiming for. By living according to a *moral framework*, we relate to a certain idea of what is good. And because this idea gives direction to our dealings with ourselves, others and the world, it indeed constitutes our identity.

The moral reference framework for people's lives is in fact a collection of what Taylor calls *strong evaluations*. These strong evaluations determine what we consider good and praiseworthy or in fact bad or reprehensible. And because these strong evaluations are derived in a hermeneutically interpretive context, they cannot be reduced to objectified, causal, biological reactions. It is these strong evaluations that enable us to integrate moral values, moral obligations, a vision of what type of life is worthwhile, and our place in the world, in our own life story. In a *best account*, certain *goods* are always discounted, *hyper* as well as *constitutive goods*. *Hyper goods* are the ultimate foundation of

our moral frameworks. They indicate what someone's life is all about, their deepest aspirations.

Constitutive goods continually guide and enable the pursuit of these *hyper goods*.

For what follows, it is important to note that the *goods* contained in a moral framework can of course vary from person to person. Some people may try to base their identity for instance on the pursuit of simply individual pleasure, whereas others will form their identity by focusing their lives on "the needs of the people, the demands of nature, the duties of citizenship or the voice of God". We should therefore continually differentiate between the role of the individual in choosing a particular moral framework and the substance of the strong evaluations that characterize the individually selected framework.

Human beings are not only searching for harmony but also sense and meaning. That is why each worldview is not as equally adequate as another. For a belief, an interpretive framework for our lives, to be actually meaningful, and lead to a lasting moral identity, it is not enough that I am simply free to choose the ideology. It is namely not just about being *our choice*, but also *what* we choose, whether our choice is actually able to connect with a moral source. In order to be truly meaningful, to transform an individual into a significant self, it is thus insufficient that a life perspective is grounded on a free personal choice. It must be embedded in a common moral horizon, a supra-individual moral context. As humans we can only develop a meaningful personal identity by being part of a horizon of meaning which transcends our own individual particularity and freedom of choice. At stake is a cultural-moral ontology which treats us as individuals. According to Taylor, a given moral background that both inspires and appeals to us, inviting us to respond, is ultimately indispensable.

It is therefore not sufficient to choose one or other moral framework in isolation. Finding actual meaning and opening up a truly meaningful perspective require more than ascertaining that the strong evaluations are *our* evaluations. This all becomes apparent when we ask ourselves why, apart from the content, an experience of meaning is characterized as actually phenomenological. An experience of meaning always refers to a wider context for the experience to make sense. This wider context does not end at the boundaries of our own immediate needs and desires. Only from the whole, from a cohesive connection, or in other words, from a reference context that includes us, can we as humans

experience sense. Anyone who withdraws within themselves will then not be able to experience sense. Such a person places himself outside every cohesion of sense and thus finally beyond life itself. In addition, man does not actually create sense himself. Rather we discover sense in the world around us. It is not the case that I create sense by focusing on my friends, family, art, philosophy, and science. On the contrary. It is much more a case of these things providing me with a sense. They have a value and as such, are able to give me a sense, instead of me being the one who has to impose a value and therefore a sense on them. The sense we find is then always beyond ourselves. And that is even a condition for undergoing an experience of meaning at all. I cannot pretend. I cannot decide that my daughter is meaningful for me because I give her this meaning. No, it is rather that she has meaning for me because it is she who gives me this meaning. Not myself, but my daughter is the source of my experience of sense, even though my existence is of course a prerequisite for experiencing this sense at all. We are increasingly unlocking sense, as we encounter it in our meaningful interaction with the world, not as its ultimate creators.

Our search for meaning thus always refers in itself to a horizon of sense that precedes our individual projects, our own specific needs and desires. Only by focusing on this background, can we really define meaning.

Taylor makes this point very succinctly in his book *The malaise of modernity*. Everyone has of course the right to shape his or her life as they choose. This is a great thing that Taylor certainly does not want to challenge. On the contrary. He considers the pursuit of personal self-development a great achievement of mankind. And it is crucially important that we allow each other the freedom of choice. But this does not mean that we cannot challenge one another or question each other's values. Such moral relativism is not fruitful. It is important to want to discuss with each other the good life, and what kind of life can be intrinsically valuable. For no moral choice is meaningful on account of the simple fact that I was free to make that choice; that it is 'my choice'. Indeed, a moral choice should always be a freely made autonomous choice. But being free to choose is not enough to also make that choice meaningful. For that, it has to fulfil a context beyond me, whereby I recognize myself as a social being, able to inspire.

In his work, Taylor puts forward a number of arguments against moral relativism. This relativism teaches us that every human being possesses their own values based on subjective preferences. It would be impossible to debate this. What's more, that should not even be allowed. Everyone has the right to develop their own life-style and that is precisely why, according to the moral relativist, no-one should be entitled to criticize another person's values. Taylor finds this self-centered moral subjectivism a serious mistake and a huge hindrance for authentic self-fulfillment.

In the first place it is incoherent. It indeed starts from a powerful affirmation of a moral ideal, namely the ideal of moral relativism itself: the search for the good life cannot and *may* not be a topic of discussion. Besides, everyone is different. The belief that people are nevertheless *equal*, which is shared by the subjectivists, thus assumes the existence of certain supra-individual values which make us equal.

Secondly, relativism incorrectly assumes that people can decide for themselves what is truly significant. However, to define ourselves meaningfully, to shape our originality, we will have to come up with a background, a given horizon that is significant and valuable. For example I cannot decide myself that the number of hairs on my head is important for determining myself. Taylor says, "I am probably the only person with exactly 3732 hairs on my head, but who cares?" It would be stupid to base an identity on this.

According to Taylor, moral subjectivism means that all the options are equally valuable because they are chosen freely. The freedom of choice *makes* something valuable. But denying in this way every existing meaningful horizon, means we are ultimately completely unable to find a significantly meaningful difference between for example wanting to make an effort to improve the situation of the weaker people in society and wanting to have exactly 3732 hairs on your head.

Without a given horizon, all our choices are thus indifferent and lose every significance. Each confirmed difference becomes meaningless. Taylor rightly states: "I cannot claim to define myself, just because I prefer steak to chicken. I do not decide which issues are important. If that was the case, no one single issue would be important".

Some choices are obviously more or less significant than others. I can only define my identity against a backdrop that matters and is given, independent of my will. In other words, only if there is a common horizon of values, and values that really matter, can I decide on a meaningful identity for myself, establishing a subjectivity that is neither superficial nor banal. Whoever withdraws within themselves by making their choices entirely independent of this common background, will ultimately no longer be able to justify these choices to themselves and others. Or, as Gerrit Glas aptly expresses in his *oratio*: “If the only thing that counts is that *I* choose what is meaningful and what is not, and that it does not matter *what* I choose, then my choice is not only random, but also in fact irrelevant.” My entire existence becomes indifferent. Such choices have indeed nothing to do with original self-development and authenticity.

As previously stated, there has to be a culturally-moral ontology that forms the cohesion only within which the search for sense becomes meaningful. Something common in the world outside us corresponds with certain norms that each one of us can ultimately discover within ourselves. Our lives make sense when they remain connected with this horizon that transcends our order of ourselves. This is the only way we as humans can achieve a complete and balanced self-realization. And this is the only way we make use of the possibilities for meaning and strive for a fuller, more differentiated existence. Against this background, wanting to suffice with an all too easy reference to the inviolable sovereignty of the individual is thus hopelessly inadequate.

The conclusion has to be that not every moral framework is equally adequate for opening up the possibilities to experience sense. In this context Taylor even speaks of the ‘spiritual dimension’ of morals. By making contact with the moral sources outside of me, and letting these resonate in me and subsequently give these sources a personal fulfilment, only then can I be a complete person, truly faithful to myself, and so achieve actual authenticity.

Sense is not entirely established by man. Self-expression indeed requires my choices to actually be *my* own choices, but as we have seen, this does *not* mean that the substance of my choices must reflect me. It is not possible to achieve actual authenticity just by looking towards demands that arise purely from my individual preferences. We only find true sense and meaning in something beyond ourselves,

that connects us with a wider whole. In this way there is an intrinsic relationship with the good. The relationship between the subject and the good is not random.

The malaise of modernity exists, according to Taylor, in that we are scarcely still in touch with a supra-individual horizon that encompasses us. Common moral sources of inspiration have disappeared, which has led to absolutization and consequently a trivialization of individual lives. The end result is a laudable search for authenticity and self-realization in a disrupted, indifferent and purely self-centered, unbound individualism. This is disastrous, both for us and society. A narcissistic subjectivism thrown back on oneself, an excessive individualism, the emergence of a narrow 'I' for whom everything outside this 'I' can still only be a tool, a resource or utensil for one's own wishes and needs, are, based on Taylor's analysis, the main causes of so many crises in our time, not least the banking crisis. A fragmented society of detached individuals, locked up in their own hearts, an atomistic society where fundamentally inspiring ties hardly or no longer exist, is what lies behind the emergence of these crises.

A solution appears to have been found in society by reconnecting with our moral sources. By rediscovering the original sources of ourselves.