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### **Charles Taylor's Idea of the Self**

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#### **Abstract**

*As a moral realist, Taylor tries to establish a concept that morality is the basis to understand the human existence and his identity. He argues that morality defines the self or our identity, because human being got appeared into the world as an embodied and moral agent with an inherent sense of morality. However, human ideas have not fully been developed but still flourishing towards a higher perfection, and therefore our understanding of the human self is still in the making. Without resorting to any extreme position we see in the Plato's 'theory of idea' which focuses on the abstract values and in the naturalist or reductionist principle which focuses only on the physical experience following the natural science, Taylor attempts to incorporate both the abstract and the concrete world to understand the human self. Morality or good is, therefore, not always transcendental but immanent, and it gets manifested through the embodied world. Taylor, therefore, argues that, to realize the true self-identity, one has to pursue morality within the lived world.*

***Keywords: Self Identity, Embodied Agent, Morality, Communal Narrative, Moral Framework***

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**1. Introduction:** Taylor argues that morality has an objective existence and is the source of human identity. He believes that, unlike other animals, human beings are moral animals possessing an inherent sense of moral good and moral evaluation. He claims that the moral source, good, hypergood, moral evaluation and moral framework, where an essence of the self is embedded, are givens and not a mere mental construct. Therefore, a person is not a mere self devoid of good but a moral self found with other communal narratives within a moral framework. Being a moral realist who thinks the morals are givens, Taylor understands that the human agent by nature has a sense of moral evaluation on the competing goods and accordingly praises or condemns the acts of the doers. Hence, moral evaluation is one of the objective and essential features of human identity. In the moral evaluation, one good among the other competing goods in the particular framework is qualitatively most preferred which is called the hypergood. And human aspiring for the

hypergood is motivated by the moral source or constitutive good. Though this moral source finds with the self in the moral framework, it also transcends the self and the social narratives. Taylor argues that a moral framework is the moral landmark of human existence within which the moral agent is only capable of experiencing, articulating, choosing and qualitatively ordering the life goods. The self and the good are interwoven in the framework, because one cannot exclusively talk of the good without at the same time talk of the moral life and actions. However, apart from the life goods and moral evaluation, a moral framework is also constituted of human stories, cultures, language, social and political institutions. Hence, a moral framework itself is embedded in the human existence with a communal narrative and articulacy. Taylor argues that though humans are a conscious, evaluative and moral being- the qualities absent in other animals, they also share certain animal qualities such as sexual desire, feelings, emotions, etc. Human beings are therefore an embodied agent having a lived experience with other things in the world despite humans are goal oriented and free oriented beings transcending other nature.

**2. Source of the Self:** Taylor claims that the human existence itself as a moral being with an inherent capacity to experience, evaluate and interpret morality presupposes the objective existence of the moral source. Such moral reflection implies the moral source as real, transcendental and independent of the human subjective interpretation. This moral source is also called a constitutive good. It is a source of moral motivation and inspiration to the self in the pursuit of the life goods; generosity, courage, kindness, justice, equality, etc. In his work, *Sources of the Self*, Taylor views that a thing of higher standard requires a source outside of the thing itself but gives a quality of goodness to that thing; the life goods in this case (516, 122). The moral goods are therefore givens, and they have to be realized and interpreted based on their objective attributes irrespective of the cultural and the human subjective interpretation. The moral source therefore transcends the self, the life goods and the moral framework. Taylor places those objective goods in the higher realm separated from the other goods such as animal desires. He argues that, though many of us are not conscious of it, there are some qualities that are universally possessed by all the morally healthy human beings irrespective of the culture. And despite weaknesses and often look ourselves bad for our inability to practice some goods, our own moral intuition and evaluation admits that we consider those objective and transcendental values such as generosity, kindness, justice and equality more important and respected than those corporeal values such as animal desire for sex, food, survival etc (*Sources*, 20). Taylor is a moral pluralist without becoming a moral relativist, because the former makes a qualitative distinction or order of the goods, whereas the latter does not. He balances both theory and practice of the given morality as thinking and living presupposes each other. He is therefore open to objective and dialectical judgment and debate on the preferences and choices of good without subjecting ourselves to the subjective preferences of one good to another good. He believes that, in carrying out an objective moral evaluation, there will be a normative and transcendental command to our sense that we prefer those goods which are qualitatively higher in order to those goods which are animal desires (*Sources*, 4, 20). Independence of the good is, therefore, the basis in Taylor's approach to morality. Flanagan

views that Taylor's moral evaluation is both descriptive because it describes human nature, and normative because it prescribes a correct moral conduct to us (147). Taylor offers two human actions, one that carries out a medical relief work and the other that carries out sex trafficking or child pornography. He asserts that it is a common sense to every moral person that carrying out a medical relief work appeals to good more than engaging in sex trafficking, and this sense of good is objective, universal and instinctive to all the normal humans (*Sources*, 42). Taylor's moral evaluation itself affirms that the moral source or good precedes evaluation since evaluation is possible only because something exists prior to evaluation. This understanding therefore justifies the logical and ontological claim of the existence of the moral source (*Sources*, 99). Taylor expands the concept of morality by including that the agent should not only do the good as a command, but must also fall in love with the moral source (*Sources*, 93)

**2.1. Moral Evaluation:** Moral evaluation means a hierarchical ordering of the goods based on their properties such as justice, equality and kindness are better than the animal desire for sex, food, survival etc. Respecting human life is praised and murder is condemned by every member of the society. Taylor sees this universal fact of respecting life being translated into the language of 'right' in the western context (*Sources*, 11), and what we derived after carrying out a moral debate and evaluation speaks that such conviction is not one of adrenal reactions but one of human moral intuition (*Sources*, 7). In Taylor's realism, apart from the objective aspect, the self also has the subjective aspects that make humans to not just act but also to evaluate their actions. He accepts the fact of the importance of human subjective preference and interpretation of morality without negating the objective moral conviction. However, the subjective aspect of moral self-evaluation of the actions is always directed to a certain objective moral standard. Taylor argues that subjective preference and choice is a factual experience and it is sometimes influenced by the cultures. A particular good is not being treated or desired equally in all the cultures depending on the communal influence and narratives. In spite of this social influence in choosing the goods, there is still a universal acceptance that some goods are considered more desirable and valuable, because every moral person irrespective of culture feels an intuitive command from within that those goods are preferred in the human moral choice (*Sources*, 58, 68, 74). He also accepts some subjective aspects of morality, but it only means making the implicit property of morality explicit through human evaluation and interpretation (*Sources*, 342). Ruth Abbey also views that Taylor's subjective quality of morality is dependent on the interpretation and existence of the moral agent (29). The hierarchical order of good through moral evaluation gives the self a meaningful life and defines the identity of the moral self. However, a moral evaluation is not a force but more of an objective moral appeal. The agent identity is therefore not fixed as inherited from the past, but open to new interpretation based on the contextual change in the future. Taylor claims that, without the moral agent making a moral discrimination, the life of the human agent will remain unworthy and unexplained because a self-evaluated life is one of the essential features of human identity as it provides an answer to the question of who and what am I as a moral self (*Sources*, 28, 34, 87).

**2.2. Hypergood:** Taylor argues that there are many goods in the particular given framework. In each moral framework, one good, by virtue of its objective quality, will surpass all the other goods and that good is called a hypergood. Just as there are many goods and moral frameworks, he also believes in the plurality of hypergood. Different moral frameworks, therefore, have different hypergoods. Taylor claims that hypergood influences, regulates or orders and sustains other goods in the given moral framework. It is the hypergood that defines and bears the whole structure and meaning of that framework. Hypergood comes to the central picture and acts as a driving force and prerequisite in defining who the moral agent is (*Sources*, 63). Hypergood is independent in nature and therefore not subject to the subjective interpretation of the self. However, when the moral agent pursues the good, he is guided by the existing social narratives of that particular moral framework. Good, therefore, has to be achieved and made explicit as a communal narrative in the form of culture, language and belief. Irrespective of the differences, every society has a sense of morality, and the members of that society always have a natural tendency to aspire for the highest good among the many competing goods existing in the framework. One good surpassing other goods in the given framework is neither eliminating nor completely suppressing other goods, but a dynamic ordering of goods based on their quality which is changeable following the different context. By making the process dynamic and not static, Taylor tries to restore a moral source that has been lost out in the modern moral philosophy by focusing on one single good as the only good, which is self-happiness (*Sources*, 520). By employing the idea of hypergood, Taylor tries to embrace the diversity of goods so that history and culture have not been ruled out from his moral philosophy as they are the indispensable parts of human existence. Also, by employing the idea of a dynamic order of goods without any epistemological fixed setting, it offers the moral agent a chance to re-evaluate his moral position and actualize closer towards the highest good or meaningful life which in turn gives a true identity to the self.

**2.3. Moral Framework:** A moral framework is the moral landmark within which the moral self pursues the life goods and makes moral choice and evaluation. Moral framework is constituted of the life goods, constitutive good, hypergood and other social elements such as culture, language, social stories and institution. Just as the physical space with different contents in space to space, moral space also has many moral frameworks with social elements and various qualitatively ordered goods as the constituents. Taylor argues that we can experience, motivate, articulate, evaluate, define and be conscious of ourselves only within the parameter of the moral framework, whether or not these activities are quite visible or mild to some of us in terms of consciousness. And any attempt of searching our identity outside this framework would result to a moral disaster (*Sources*, 27-28). The moral framework ontologically transcends the self even though the self and the moral framework are interwoven in the lived world. Different from Foucault who thinks the goods are not ontologically good but created by the powerful elites, Taylor's goods are ontological, and despite being influenced often by our parents and society in our moral choice, one can, through moral evaluation, still shift from one framework to another or one good to another good based on objective articulation and interpretation of the new and discovered

framework (*Sources*, 17-18). Hence, the moral framework of Taylor is dynamic and open to an objective dialectical debate. Taylor cannot be accused of being a nihilist or relativist for the employment of dynamic framework and self-interpretation because his ultimate moral claim rests in a true self to be defined in terms of the objective articulation and order of the good (*Sources*, 99). It is true even from the common sense that any ideal concept cannot be discussed alone without being connected to the lived objects. Taylor therefore claims that whenever we talk about the good or the moral framework, we naturally have to talk about the human existence as a moral agent (*Sources*, 42).

**2.4. Communal Narratives:** Taylor argues that humans are not only a moral being but also a language being. He broadens the concept of framework to include other fellow social members, culture, language and communal narrative along with the life goods. Just as the moral framework, communal narrative is one of the dimensions of the self. It is simply not practical to define oneself without having any interaction with the Other-families and friends- and communal narratives. One can develop and realize one's identity only by involving oneself in the social webs of communication. The self alone cannot understand what morality is. It is the dynamic and reflective community that manifests, nurtures and cherishes the goods. The narrative of the self is embedded in the narrative of the community and vice versa. Taylor argues that I can only be in the position to define myself by virtue of my spiritual and physical relation with my families or loved ones and community with whom I also realize my social and moral status, my identity, depending on the existing social narrative (*Sources*, 35). Hence, one understanding of the self is always found within a culture and language which is open to change and progress. The culture of modernity too is, therefore, a gradual development from the past culture when human understanding and thinking progresses forward. The bad culture such as slavery will be condemned and stopped to practice as human moral evaluation progresses. Taylor also argues that the language used in the human science is not as neutral and objective as the language used in the natural science (*Sources*, 59; *Gadamer and the Human Science*, 280). He further argues that self is interpreted through language and the language exists only in the community. The diversity of culture of different communities interprets the self depending on the existing narratives of that community. Narrative structures one's identity. One is self only in reference to other selves, communal narratives and the surroundings (*Sources*, 35).

**3. Understanding the Human Agency:** Understanding our own self is to understand our moral existence, and the moral problems associated with our existence. Taylor argues that to be a self or agent means to be one who is goal oriented, and who pursues and attains the goal. The agent should be aware of himself and his actions, desires, aversion, choices, aspiration, feelings, etc. To be the agent is to constantly search for significance and meaning of life. The agent should look into his inner world, his real human nature of being embedded in the lived world, his moral space, individuality, freedom and responsibility that follows (*The Person*, 257-262). He, however, rejects any universal definition of what is to be a self because human beings are a self-interpreting being, and the agent with the inherent power of self-evaluation can achieve moral good. According to Taylor, there are two kinds of our

desire: the order desire and the second order desire. The first order desire is a weak evaluation and the second order desire is a strong evaluation. The first order desire relates to our ordinary human desire such as choice of food items and choice of place to visit which are immediate and need no serious moral reflection. The second order desire relates to questioning our moral justification as to why one prefers this thing to another thing; why one chooses this action or goal over another. Taylor borrows the idea of two kinds of desire from Harry Frankfurt's second order desire or strong evaluation of the person (15-20). Taylor means the second order desire in the search for agent's meaning of life and identity as it appeals us to evaluate our decision or preference based on the qualitative nature of the object, and he maintains that utilitarianism follows the first order desire. In his work, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, Taylor argues that self-evaluation of the action comes with responsibility of the agent. Strong evaluation and responsibility of the agent are inherently connected since, in the process of evaluation, there involves the use of personal freedom and inner wisdom that makes life worth living (28-33). He emphasizes on the strong evaluation and responsibility of the agent to have a deeper understanding of the agent because it is the strong evaluation that defines the self by distinguishing humans as an evaluative being which is absent in other animals. Taylor writes: "Our identity is therefore defined by certain evaluations which are inseparable from ourselves as agents" (*Human Agency*, 34). He claims that his writing is not epistemological, but rather metaphysical, anthropological and ontological. Therefore, his explanation of the human nature as a moral agent is more than a neutral and impartial description as done in the natural science. Taylor's understanding of the human science is based on good faith, honest, bold and self-authentic reflection (*Human Agency*, 29-33). Human as a self-evaluator being presupposes human as a self-interpreting being.

**3.1. A Self-Interpreting Agent:** Taylor gives importance to the reality of human existence as the embodied beings in the world with the capacity to interpret themselves depending on their fields of perception. Interpreting oneself according to one experiences his existence is therefore one of the essential features of human identity (*Human Agency*, 3). In other words, self-interpretation constitutes the nature of human being. Unlike other animals, human self-interpretation is a complex structure in human existence, and it is not as clear and objective as the natural science interprets nature. Taylor is against of the reductionist and naturalist position mainly influenced by the Cartesian dualism that tries to explain human existence based on the method of neutrality and objectivity used in the natural science. Therefore, any attempt to explain the human agent based on the natural science is incoherent and impossible. Taylor argues that the subject-referring properties such as human emotions, desire, motivation, inspiration, feelings, moral obligation, fulfillment, shame and realization of mistake describe the human agent (*Human Agency*, 54, 60). All these human qualities cannot be put into reflection without language. Our sense of dignity, moral remorse and shame and other feelings are interpreted through language. Taylor writes: "we are language animals, we are stuck with language, as it were" (*Human Agency*, 72). Human self-interpretation affirms and sustains his subjective nature without reducing the self to a mere object of research. Taylor views that interpretation incorporates our motivation, emotions,

moral thought and values to the human agent, and humans interpreting themselves is not a luxury but an essential part of human existence to the fullest (*Human Agency*, 65, 75).

**3.2. An Embodied Agent:** Human being as an embodied agent is not the original idea of Taylor. He borrows it from phenomenological thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. Humans are embodied beings because the subject's experiences and thoughts are always embodied in the world. It means that, in all respects, the human nature as an embodied subject is related to the world. Perception is the fundamental feature of the embodied subject. The subject perceives the world in his station and with his sense organs. The subject's senses and the background or spatial-temporal dimensions such as 'up and down' and 'back and forth' are the preconditions for perception. Perception is an experience of the embodied agent who is engaged with the world. And the perception of the embodied agent always takes place against the perceptual field or background. The background exists only for the subject to perceive or experience (Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 24). It is the background that structures the perception of the subject. However, what the subject really perceives in the perceptual field is the potential activities the subject could have and not the field itself. The perceptual field itself is nothing without providing potential activities to the perceiver. The perceptual fields therefore open the subject to the world of experience and interpretation. However, the agent sees the world as the way he experiences it, and knows nothing of the thing in itself which Taylor leaves a room for a transcendental world. Taylor therefore claims that our sense of ourselves as an embodied agent itself is a constitutive of our experience (*Philosophical Arguments*, 25). In other words, our experiences are constituted by our sense of ourselves as an embodied agent. Our thoughts and experiences are the thoughts and experiences of the embodied agent, and without this sense we cannot even be a subject or exercise our subjectivity or aware of the world (*Sources*, 14). Agents' embodiment makes us understand our own human nature. Therefore, agent's embodiment and self-understanding are deeply interwoven. We can define and interpret our own existence because we are an embodied agent. Taylor's embodied world is opposed to a mechanistic world of reductionism that makes a distinction between the subject and object.

**3.3. A Self Beyond Naturalism:** Taylor views that the nature of human self or agency cannot be adequately explained within the framework of naturalism because human nature is much more complicated and mysterious than the other ordinary things in the world, and therefore cannot be explained through the principle of neutrality and objectivity used in the natural science. In his work, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*, Taylor claims that naturalism explains the human agent based on the principle of natural science without making any distinction between man and nature (2). It tries to explain human nature like the qualities of other material objects undermining the human subjective properties such as a sense of moral values, evaluation, reflection, interpretation, motivation, feelings and emotions. He claims that the framework of naturalism is not broad enough to accommodate those human subjective qualities. Human existence with those subjective qualities itself is a mystery and we cannot even truly and fully understand who we are as a person. The framework to define the human agent is much broader than the framework of

naturalism. One may argue that those subjective qualities are explicitly part of culture and civilization, but Taylor claims that they are but not seen separately from the agent and they are incorporated by the agent into his self-understanding. According to Taylor, another is the intellectualist or reductionist (Cartesian) view that considers human consciousness as the only and real representation of the world, and objectifying the material things as neutral and are always available to serve the ends of the self (*Human Agency*, 104), however this view only gives an incomplete account of the human self (*Human Agency*, 103) Taylor claims that both intellectualism and naturalism are common on three things: disengagement from the world, objectification of the world and freedom of the self. Disengagement means disenchantment of the self from the world and objectification of the world means making the objects in the world to serve the interest or ends of the self. Taylor, therefore, thinks that disengagement and objectification give the self a freedom (*Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 5). Taylor's world is an embodied world which is not exclusive as we see in naturalism and intellectualism. However, he does not completely reject them. Taylor argues that naturalist and intellectualist idea of disenchantment and objectification have attracted the minds of the moderns (*Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 4). The modern agents have transferred the naturalist and intellectualist or reductionist epistemology to social or human sciences such as economics, polity, psychology, socio-anthropology, etc. The modern economic activity of production and supply is now solely based on the material interest and well-being of the economic agents with no concern for nature (*Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 92). The modern concept of political rights and liberty has now become a natural right of the political agents. Disenchantment of the agent and objectification of the things have also shared the religious aspiration especially the Judeo-Christian values of spiritual transcendence. Taylor views that these phenomena explain how everything orbits around the centre of the human agent. Humans have been made superior and primacy over everything and placed at the centre of the universe (*Human Agency*, 104-105). Humans are no longer in the chain of cosmic order like other things in the world which we see in the Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics. This concerns Taylor because he sees displacement of the self from moral domain in the quest of his authenticity and identity. Taylor is clearly not against of the desperate search for spiritual freedom, authenticity and meaningful life by the moderns because it is the new version of the traditional aspiration for spiritual freedom (*Human Agency*, 112-113). Taylor does not want to completely oppose the naturalist and reductionist aspiration for spiritual liberation, but what he is against is only the methods or approach adopted by the moderns in their search for a true, authentic and free self by abandoning moral source external to the self (*Human Agency*, 113) which is but a source of our motivation and inspiration in the self-actualization towards the higher good or ends of life. Humans never get satisfied with his present state of affairs but are always wanting for improvement and change for good or worse. This phenomenon therefore transcends naturalism. This is the reality of human existence. Humans will always try to venture beyond the limit of his reason which Kant calls landing up on faith. Taylor, therefore, sees the similar spiritual desperation in the lives of moderns who adopted naturalism and reductionism as a means to free themselves from any external force or authority in search of



the real self. Taylor's moral philosophy opens the possibilities to better understand and realize the aspiration of the self which is but realizing the true identity of the self as an embodied agent in the world. Freedom defines the self, and the self attains real spiritual freedom by accepting morality as the framework.

4. **Conclusion:** As a moral realist, Taylor defends and explains the absolute reality of the moral source by introducing the life goods, hypergoods, constitutive good and moral framework which all and ultimately refer back to the moral source. In relation to the moral framework, the moral source is transcendental and the hypergood is immanent. He shows the necessity of the moral framework in the moral agent's actualization towards a moral perfection which will then define the identity of the moral agent. Taylor being attracted to the phenomenology or embodiment of Heidegger and Ponty, the perceptual field or background of the embodied agent's experience which includes the moral framework and culture as the constituents is very important to understand the human existence as the moral self. He sees human as a moral agent inherently embedded in the world, therefore, the self is neither disengaging from the world by becoming a pure subject nor objectifying the non-human agents by considering them as the mere and neutral objects meaning to serve the ends of the human agent. Taylor accepts the reality of the objective existence of the world without denying the reality of the existence of the objective and transcendental source, a source which is moral and good, that causes all existence. And human being realizes his true self or identity by taking part in the embodied world.

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