# CHARLES TAYLOR'S DIAGNOSIS OF THE MALAISES OF MODERNITY

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**Abstract.** We refer here to Charles Taylor's critical assessment of modern Western culture, based on his work *The Ethics of Authenticity*, when he characterised the malaise of modernity by the loss of horizons of meaning, namely by the replacement of a cosmic order that supported social hierarchies with a subjectivist and relativist individualism. In addition to this diagnosis, a new perspective emerges: the unease that haunts modernity is also driven by the primacy of instrumental reason in individuals' lives and the resulting erosion of freedom due to blurred moral horizons.

From these three identified ailments, Taylor highlights what he sees as modernity's vital principle: authenticity. Rather than engaging in the broader debate on modernity, he seeks to uncover the often-overlooked moral sources of Western civilisation. His ultimate goal is to enable a "work of regeneration" of modernity's ideals.

**Keywords:** malaise of modernity, authenticity, recognition, individualism, Charles Taylor

## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the work of Charles Taylor and his reconstruction of the meaning of recent modernity. *The Ethics of Authenticity* ([1992] 2009) is considered to be a synthesis of Taylor's political theory, where authenticity and recognition are taken as central concepts.

*The Ethics of Authenticity* is the culmination of Taylor's previous research and is characterised by its clarity of argument and language.

It showcases optimism based on the consideration of freedom and authenticity as the determining sources of modernity. These human ideals seem valuable, despite the deformations they often suffer in the reality of human life. The author calls for a better culture of authenticity, which must be a constant effort in favour of the rehabilitation of authenticity and higher forms of freedom.

Modernity, being a major theme in contemporary philosophy and political theory, is often involved in a heated debate between supporters and opponents. In a dispute between various conceptions of human beings and society, as well as the foundation of ethical principles, where the legitimacy that each person gives to their life is decided, Taylor does not adopt this model of analysis. He makes an extensive diagnosis of modernity and detects a significant malaise, which he summarises in three ailments: egocentric individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and the loss of freedom (Taylor [1992] 2009, 17-27).

In *The Ethics of Authenticity,* we find a rigorous examination of modern culture. Taylor makes a critical assessment that does not align with any of the extreme poles in relation to modernity, nor does he intend to present a middle ground capable of harmonising the opposing positions. Firstly, the author seeks to identify the essence of modernity within its entire framework of ideas and practices. Only this essence can serve as the unifying principle that enables the success of the modern project. Taylor refers to this core principle—modernity's central moral ideal—as authenticity. In examining the transformation of Western culture, particularly the moral significance of authenticity, Taylor rejects the paths of subjectivism and soft relativism. Instead, he acknowledges the deeper implications of recognizing authenticity as a moral force. In other words, the author considers that some forms of life are higher than others, which is not accepted by the culture of tolerance towards any form of self-realisation. Taylor opposes the liberalism of neutrality, not pushing the discussion of the good life to the margins of political debate.

The way Taylor looks at modernity evokes Alexis de

Tocqueville's attitude towards democracy in Europe and North America: now we can't stop being modern, democratic for Tocqueville; the central task is to make modernity good modernity, just as Tocqueville wanted to make democracy good democracy.

The philosophical discourse of *The Ethics of Authenticity* starts from a moral diagnosis of the modern age, where Taylor ([1992] 2009, 25) states "firstly, what we might call the loss of meaning, the blurring of moral horizons. Secondly, the eclipse of ends in the face of unbridled instrumental reason. And finally, the loss of freedom". The transformations brought by modernity are well-known and very disturbing, which is why the author goes deeper to analyse them.

## First Malaise: Self-Centred Individualism

His first concern is individualism (Taylor [1992] 2009, 18), perhaps the greatest achievement of the modern age that few would renounce. Individualism allows freedom and social mobility in multiple ways that were impossible in pre-modern times. People have the right to choose their life model, their convictions, and to determine the shape of their lives in many different ways. However, Taylor ([1992] 2009, 18) presents us with an ambivalent position: "We have won modern freedom by detaching ourselves from the old moral horizons". People were part of a wider order, the "great chain of being", with a hierarchy that was reflected in the hierarchies of the social world. They occupied predefined positions from which it was almost impossible to leave. However, at the same time as this wider order restricted, it also gave meaning to the world and social life. As Taylor ([1992] 2009, 19) explains, "the rituals and norms of society had more than a merely instrumental meaning. The discrediting of these orders was called the *disenchantment* of the world. With it, things lost some of their aura". With the discrediting of these orders comes modern freedom.

Rather than delving into the debate around modernity, Taylor is above all interested in analysing some of its consequences for

human life and the meaning of these transformations. The author emphasises the frequent idea that human beings have lost something important with the deprivation of broader horizons of meaning, both social and cosmic. Humans have lost their sense of a higher purpose—one truly worth dedicating their lives to. According to him ([1992] 2009, 19), the loss of ideals has been joined by the narrowing of horizons, leading people to lose a broader vision, "because they have concentrated on their individual lives." In this sense, Tocqueville ([1981] 2004, 389) had already pointed this out:

> I want to imagine what new traits despotism could produce in the world: I see an incalculable multitude of similar and equal men who revolve around themselves without rest in order to obtain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls.

Studying American society, the author spoke of oppression that threatened democratic peoples and that was nothing like oppression of pre-modern times. Democratic equality, says Tocqueville ([1981] 2004, 121), incessantly turns the individual into himself and "threatens to enclose him, finally, entirely, in the solitude of his own heart". For Taylor, "the dark side of individualism is the concentration on the self, which simultaneously flattens and narrows our lives, makes them meaningless and less attentive to others and to society" ([1992] 2009, 20).

The various forms of "narcissistic" individualism in contemporary Western culture are fuelled by a strong tendency towards self-centredness on one's own subjectivity, a search for human fulfilment centred and enclosed within the individual. According to Hugo Chelo (2009, 169), this inclination, when combined with a conception of freedom as pure self-determination, in which individual choice, without recourse to other references of intelligibility, plays the sole role in determining meaning, leads to the moral subjectivism that underpins soft relativism. When this tendency is combined with social and political conceptions stemming from the development of individualist theoretical

currents of universal rights, procedural justice and the affirmation of the sphere of intimacy as the only realm of personal fulfilment, then personal and social relationships tend to be viewed instrumentally, thus sustaining social atomism.

Thus, both moral subjectivism and social atomism are the result of modern individualism, which is closed to pre-existing horizons of meaning and to understanding the dialogical nature of human identity (Chelo 2009, 169). This individualism of anomie, which must be distinguished from individualism as a moral ideal, is linked to the expansion of instrumental reason, both of which are boosted by various social transformations such as industrialisation, urbanisation and social mobility, which in turn foster phenomena such as the breakdown of ancestral ties, the multiplication of impersonal and casual relationships and an instrumental understanding of the individual's relationship with the community, the past, nature, society, and ultimately with themselves. This self-centred individualistic form that instrumentalises all kinds of relationships drives radical anthropocentrism. This is the first malaise that Taylor diagnoses in our contemporary culture. It is structured as an insufficient and deformed conception of the ideal of authentic self-realisation open to others and embedded in broader horizons of meaning.

## Second Malaise: The Primacy Of Instrumental Reason

After exploring the first malaise of modernity, namely disenchanted self-centred individualism, the narrative continues with a brief analysis of the other two. Taylor invokes Max Weber's image of the iron cage, which expresses the domination, in modern Western societies, of instrumental reason over humanising reason.

Max Weber ([1920] 2004, 165) created the concept of "iron cage" (*Gehäuse der Hörigkeit*) when he reflected on the "powerful cosmos of the modern economic order linked to the technical and economic presuppositions of machine production, which today determines

with overwhelming pressure the lifestyle of all individuals who are born into this machinery", by confining them as if they were in a cage. This picture represents the phenomenon of modern alienation, conceived as an inevitable result of the progressive secularisation of the world (Salvat Bologna 2014, 132), where "modern society tends to push us in the direction of atomism and instrumentalism, both because it is difficult to resist their influence in certain circumstances and because the conviction is created that they are taken for granted" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 104).

The premises that enabled the emergence and affirmation of this new way of producing and reproducing the social existence of human beings derive from the rationalisation of individual conduct, linked to another phenomenon of great importance in modern times: the primacy of instrumental reason. For Taylor ([1992] 2009, 20) *instrumental reason* is understood to be "the kind of rationality we resort to when we consider applying the simplest means to achieve a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-production *ratio*, is the measure of success."

With the collapse of the old orders, the reach of instrumental reason was enhanced.

> Once society no longer has a sacred structure and social organisation and modes of action are no longer based on the order of things or the will of God, they are, in a sense, available and can be reformulated according to the happiness and well-being of individuals. The criterion that now applies is that of instrumental reason. Similarly, once the creatures around us have lost their place in the chain of being, they become susceptible to being treated as raw material or as instruments for our projects. (Taylor [1992] 2009, 20)

This great transformation helped to free human beings from the limits of nature, to emphasise their mastery over it and to alleviate human suffering. In this regard, Taylor recalls Francis Bacon's criticism of the traditional Aristotelian sciences at the beginning of the 19th century, accusing them of having contributed nothing to improving the living conditions of humanity, and his proposal for a new "model of science whose criterion of truth would be

instrumental effectiveness" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 109). In this respect, modern science remains in complete continuity with Bacon.

For Taylor, instrumental reason has an abundant moral framework and is not just driven by an "overdeveloped *libido dominandi*" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 110). Although it often serves the goals of greater control and technological domination. The ideal of instrumental rationality draws on a wealth of complex philosophical, moral and social sources that need to be presented and articulated in order to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

The author calls on Descartes' concept of separate reason. Firstly, because

> instrumental reason has developed alongside a decontextualised model of the human subject, which plays an important role in our imagination. It offers an ideal image of human thought that would have detached itself from the messy embeddedness of our corporeal constitution, our dialogical condition, our emotions and our traditional ways of life, in order to be pure, self-regulating rationality (Taylor [1992] 2009, 106-107).

This form of reason has achieved great prestige in our culture. The ideal of self-creating thought, being one of freedom as self-determination, supports the moral ideal of a self-responsible being with the capacity for self-control. Descartes, in perceiving man as detached reason, pure mind distinct from the body and the way we understand ourselves, was the first and most eloquent to exalt this ideal and this form of rationality (Taylor [1992] 2009, 107; Chelo 2009, 171-172).

Taylor, in his work *Sources of the Self* (1989, 232), had already stated that the tremendous importance of the instrumental position is overdetermined and that it represents the convergence of more than one position. Several moral tendencies converge: the perception of ourselves as a separate reason, as we have already seen; the affirmation of *ordinary life*, the great importance attributed to the life of production and reproduction, work and the family, in order to achieve better living conditions and the alleviation of suffering and, finally, the intersection with the Baconian perspective of science, where its main objective is changed from a contemplative activity to

a productive activity aimed at improving living conditions. From this convergence emerges an ethic of universal practical benevolence, in which we accept universal solidarity, albeit imperfect, as a premise for active intervention in nature, to protect us from the cataclysms of nature and improve the human condition, thus attributing a primary role to instrumental reason (Taylor [1992] 2009, 109; Chelo 2009, 172). This ethic of universal benevolence is based on a new spiritual sense of the world, which abandons the old conceptions of a meaningful order based on an *ontic logos*.

When we move from the *ontic logos*, of Platonic and Aristotelian origin, to the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum,* we realise that there are two distinct places in the act of valuing. The first shows that each phenomenon has its own specific characteristic, in other words, the ontic meaning determines the particularities of Being (existing) from which Being-there (*Dasein*) - existence - derives. The distinction between the ontic and ontological categories belongs to Heidegger's philosophy. The meaning of the ontic category is directed towards the essence or nature of existence (Abbagnano 2003, 727). From this perspective, there is no separation between subject and object, but each phenomenon represents a precious and irreplaceable meaning. Taylor (1989, 189), in describing this scenario, emphasises that the intuitive reason of Aristotle's thought links the person, the particular world, to the world of forms. The two phenomena are inseparable. The second locus, of Cartesian origin, determined the use of instrumental reason. The new *locus* of moral evaluation is not expressed by the *ontic logos*, but from the subject as an independent existence (Taylor 1989, 188-189).

The two places referred to thus demonstrate a passage in which the manifestation of the mind is the exclusive place to realise the distinction that only the rational subject determines the existence, as well as the manipulation, of the object. Instrumental reason separates these two entities. It is up to the subject to name, classify and make objects useful. According to Taylor (1989, 189), this framework can be summarised from the following perspective: the plane of ideas, in Plato's conception, is characterised as ontic and

serves as the foundation for guiding and determining the concept of reality; for Descartes, reality is the expression of the content of the human mind. Instrumental reason, of Cartesian origin, became the locus of moral judgement in the Modern Age. Ways of thinking and acting are orientated around two central categories, namely utility and technique. People and the phenomena in which they appear before everyone are judged by their usefulness or uselessness.

From this point on, human beings take an active role in preserving themselves and the created order. This action on the world presupposes rational control over it and over oneself. The things around us are now seen as means and not as ends with their own value. "Instrumentalising things was a spiritually essential step" (Taylor 1989, 232). Through technology, it is possible to fulfil this purpose (Chelo 2009, 172).

It's important to remember that, as we saw in the case of individualism, this second malaise can't just be seen as the development of instrumental reason. This can be experienced in different ways, for example: technological development can follow the path of excessive control, or it can take place in the service of an ethic of benevolence; it can take place through an understanding of the human being as a detached reason inserted in an objectified system, or according to an understanding of the human being as a being endowed with a bodily, temporal and dialogical nature. For Taylor, the problem lies in the association and strengthening of atomistic and instrumentalist values.

The atomistic understanding of nature and the human condition is an individualistic conception that receives a fundamental formulation from Locke, acting on a naturalistic anthropological justification, specific to the scientific revolution of the 17th century. This is the concept of the "punctual self" that emerges from Lockean philosophy (Taylor 1989, 160), whose central idea is to gain control through disengagement, and detachment, in such a radical way that it encompasses the subject himself and his mental activity. The notion of detachment is always correlated with the notion of

objectification, and for Taylor (1989, 160), "objectifying a given sphere implies stripping it of the normative force it exerts on us".

Thus, according to the author, from Descartes' separate reason, through the naturalistic justification of 17th-century science to Locke's radical detachment, we are faced with a total objectification of man and his world, since all aspects of his life can be appropriated as means. An instrumentalisation thus emerges that extends to all domains, where the notion of the existence of normatively relevant ends is hidden. It is from this profoundly anti-teleological philosophical-moral conception that the possibility of following an instrumental position in relation to ourselves, in relation to others, in relation to nature, the community, the past, and social structures is sustained (Chelo 2009, 174).

In short, this second malaise, the development of instrumental reason combined with an atomistic conception, by making it impossible to give any normative meaning to human beings and the world around them, leads to the total objectification and instrumentalisation of the various dimensions of human life. This concept, combined with the importance attributed to instrumental calculation and technology as a solution to all problems, reinforces the growing bureaucratic and technological domination of the various dimensions of life (Chelo 2009, 174).

For Taylor ([1992] 2009, 23-24), instrumental reason and individualism have fearsome consequences for political life. The structures and institutions of techno-industrial society considerably limit our options, forcing individuals and societies to attach great importance to instrumental reason, implying a considerable loss of freedom. A loss of freedom, both individual and collective, since everyone is influenced by these forces and it is difficult to maintain a way of life against the current. Society and its institutions tend to push us towards an atomistic and instrumentalist self-understanding and attitude, "both because it is difficult to resist their influence in certain circumstances, and because the conviction is created that they are taken for granted" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 104).

However, Taylor ([1992] 2009, 111-112) rejects the determinism of instrumental reason suggested by Weber's "iron cage" and considers this ailment to be a deformation in the articulation and realisation of the moral ideal that sustains it. He argues that instrumental reason should be framed by the ethics of practical benevolence and that technology and calculating reasoning can be framed in a different way from the ideal of detached reason, which has been driven to the extreme by atomistic individualism.

## THIRD MALAISE: THE LOSS OF FREEDOM

This brings us to the last ailment listed by Taylor, the loss of freedom associated with social fragmentation and the difficulty individuals experience in structuring and conducting common projects. This third malaise results from the "fearful consequences of instrumental reason and individualism for political life" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 23). Thus, this last malaise depends on the other two previous ones and is their expression in the social and political domain.

For the author, this loss of freedom was brilliantly analysed by Tocqueville. In a society where individuals incessantly turn in on themselves and become

> in the kind of individuals *locked up in their own hearts*, few people will want to take an active part in political life. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the pleasures of private life, as long as the government produces sufficient means to satisfy them and distributes them widely. (Taylor [1992] 2009, 24)

This leads to a new form of despotism, a soft despotism that could be established in contemporary democratic societies. These will not necessarily be totalitarian regimes based on terror and oppression, as in other times or places. The regimes will be moderate and patronising. They may have democratic forms, with periodic elections, but in reality, everything will be governed by "an immense and tutelary power, which alone is in charge of ensuring the profit

and watching over the fate of all" (Tocqueville [1981] 2004, 389). This immense tutelary power that is beyond people's control "would degrade men without tormenting them" (Tocqueville [1981] 2004, 388). For Tocqueville, the only defence against this threat will be a vigorous political culture that encourages citizen participation at the various levels of government and the associative level. However, the atomistic individualism of self-absorbed individuals is strongly opposed to this attitude. As Taylor ([1992] 2009, 24-25) explains:

> If participation decreases and the subsidiary associations that are its vehicle wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the large bureaucratic state and rightly feels powerless. This further demotivates the citizen and closes the vicious circle of soft despotism.

Like Taylor, we can consider Tocqueville's work prophetic when we see the alienation from the public sphere and the consequent loss of political control in our highly centralised and bureaucratic world. Taylor is concerned about the risk of losing political control of our destiny, something that can be exercised in common as citizens. This is the power that Tocqueville called political freedom. What is in danger for Taylor is our dignity as citizens. The impersonal mechanisms mentioned above "may reduce the degree of freedom in society, but the loss of political freedom would mean that even the choices we have left would no longer be made by us as citizens, but by an unaccountable guardian power" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 25).

When we explore the third problem, we realise the difficulties that Taylor's proposal faces in contemporary Western society when it comes to having practical importance. As Chelo (2009, 176) explains, the realisation of the ideal of authenticity presupposes the existence of conditions of possibility for "a common awareness with a transformative character". In this sense, the third calls into question the existence of these conditions of possibility. Thus, the loss of freedom is "associated with the notion of social fragmentation and the difficulty of structuring and conducting common projects". Given that public powers in the West are far from despotic or tyrannical, the main oppression is the

powerlessness we experience in realising common projects and policies. "Fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves in an increasingly atomistic way or, to put it another way, less and less associated with their fellow citizens in common projects and causes" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 116). And even when people feel connected to others in common projects, they are mostly piecemeal projects that only bring together a group of citizens. The problem lies not in a lack of participatory experience or calls for mobilisation but in the scope and extent of these projects. Political mobilisation often goes no further than pursuing the specific interests of small groups and people rarely mobilise for broader political projects (Chelo 2009, 177).

The social fragmentation of democratic societies prevents the mobilisation of political majorities that lead to the implementation of common democratic projects on a wider scale. As citizens experience powerlessness, abandonment, and growing alienation, they find it difficult to identify with political society and feel unprotected from the state (Chelo 2009, 178).

We can conclude, in the words of Chelo (2009, 179), that

> this vicious circle between social fragmentation and piecemeal participation generates an atrophy of the political system that prevents the formation of projects that mobilise participation and common action. Therein lies the experience of powerlessness, which reflects a real lack of political freedom in conjunction with a worrying lack of recognition of what constitutes an identity factor in our contemporary societies. Loss of freedom, social fragmentation and piecemeal participation are the three marker points for a proper understanding of this third malady.

This third malaise is related to the issue of citizen intervention in the public sphere. The fear expressed by Tocqueville that democracy could slide into an immense tutelary power is**,** according to Taylor, a real threat. Similarly, "atomistic and instrumentalist positions are prime factors in generating the most degraded and superficial forms of authenticity" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 123), which is why the author refers to the positive impact that a vigorous democracy can have.

What Taylor proposes is that it is possible to turn this vicious circle into a virtuous one by counteracting conformism and promoting democratic initiatives with determination.

## CONCLUSION

Taylor ([1992] 2009, 112) proposes "a work of regeneration", urges us to fight to win "minds and hearts" to this cause and reaffirms the power of freedom, however constrained it may be.

As the author states, "This battle of ideas is inextricably linked (...) to the political struggles over models of social organisation. Given the decisive role of our institutions in creating and maintaining an atomistic and instrumental attitude" (Taylor [1992] 2009, 112).

Taylor doesn't dwell on the debate surrounding modernity but wants to understand the moral sources of our Western civilisation, often hidden in this debate, so that we can undertake "a work of regeneration" of the ideals of modernity.

Since individualism is profoundly shaped by the moral ideal of authenticity, it is a problem that both supporters and opponents of contemporary culture have avoided discussing. Taylor ([1992] 2009, 38 and 99) does not place himself at either extreme pole of this debate. On the one hand, he differs from the supporters in that he does not approve of all the forms of authenticity that are presented to us; on the other hand, unlike the opponents, he considers it to be a profound error to radically condemn the ethics of self-realisation and reaffirms the importance of considering authenticity as a moral ideal.

Taylor understands authenticity as an ideal that has been degraded, but which is indispensable in modern times, and proposes a work of regeneration that can contribute to the transformation of our practical lives. In order to achieve this goal, he ([1992] 2009, 38) begins the debate on the *Ethics of Authenticity* by proposing three ideas, all of which are controversial: "(1) that authenticity is a valid

ideal; (2) that one can rationally reflect on ideals and the conformity of practices to those ideals; and (3) that such reflection can have consequences". With the first idea, Taylor opposes the fundamental idea of the critique of the culture of authenticity; secondly, he rejects subjectivism; and finally, he doesn't accept that we are prisoners of the system, be it capitalism, bureaucracy, or industrial and technological society.

From here, as Lídia Figueiredo (2009, 147) explains, the author's narrative path goes through an analysis of the sources of authenticity, a presentation in favour of the insertion of individuals into horizons of meaning that precede them, a reflection on the need for intersubjective recognition and an explanation of the causes of the deviation from authenticity towards subjectivism.

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