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## **WHO AM I? TAYLOR'S SELFHOOD AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL CONDITION OF CONVERSATION**

Taylor's basic claim about selfhood, in contrast to naturalistic approaches, is that "we are not selves in the way we are organisms, or we don't have selves in the way we have hearts and livers" [Taylor 2001, 34]. How, then, do we 'have selves'? We 'have selves', or we come to 'have selves' through the constant effort of articulation and dialogue. For Taylor, 'having a self' is a question of self-definition, understood as the answer I give to the question of "Who am I?"<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, to have an identity is to answer that question, which requires me to give "a definition of where I am speaking from" (my orientation in moral space) "and to whom" (my speech community) [Taylor 2001, 36]. This paper aims to show how deeply language, in the form of conversation, underlies both of these features. To do so it will employ a close reading of the relevant section from *Sources of the Self*, as well as references to Taylor's essays on language and to the work of Stanley Cavell, whose thinking on the topic of language and selfhood falls along very similar lines.

### **Introduction: the Self in Speech**

First of all, it does need to be recognized that orientation in moral space is prioritized by Taylor, and the idea of somehow reconciling different goods constitutes the main thrust of his seminal *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. After all, its first, theoretical part, where his discussion of inescapable moral frameworks is to be found, is

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1 On the significance of that question, see Ricoeur 1995. There, the question of "Who am I?" is selfhood at its barest. Even when we are not able to give an answer, at "moments of extreme destitution," the question itself testifies to our concern for our identity. [Ricoeur 1995, 167].

entitled "Identity and the Good." Also in the introduction to both volumes of his *Philosophical Papers* he stresses that "to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth" [Taylor 2005, 3]. At the same time, Taylor never fails to note that the existence of that very space and the formation of those distinctions of worth are articulation-dependent. The question of articulation comes up in most of Taylor's texts concerning human agency or selfhood, such as "The Concept of a Person" and "Self-Interpreting Animals," as well as in his analyses of language itself ("Language and Human Nature" and "Theories of Meaning").<sup>2</sup> In fact, it could be claimed that one of the most important features of Taylor's philosophy is numbering the ways in which human identity is language dependent.

Here let us focus on the more recent *Sources of the Self* and analyze a fragment of section 2.2 of "The Self in Moral Space," the second chapter of Part I, "Identity and the Good."<sup>3</sup> This is where the link between language and identity is further explored within the framework of the fundamental question "Who am I?"

What emerges out of this section, especially when put together with Taylor's analyses of the nature of language from his *Philosophical Papers*, is that what we can call his communitarian claim, that a self is not an object which can in principle be described without reference to its surroundings [Taylor 2001, 34], or, simply, that "one is a self only among other selves" [Taylor 2001, 35], is reflective of the fact and the nature of language. Further, his claim that our orientation in moral space is crucial for our identity, that we are selves only in that we orient ourselves towards some good or another, is also rooted in the fact and the nature of language. Ultimately, no matter how complex our processes of self-understanding and self-identification become, their very possibility, and thus the very possibility of us becoming persons (acquiring selfhood), rests on the fulcrum of speech. Thus the acquisition of language becomes a transcendental condition of selfhood. What is more, as Taylor points out, the acquisition and possession and

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<sup>2</sup> See his *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Part I, "Identity and the Good," serves as a theoretical introduction to the following historical parts that retrace the shaping of modern selfhood.

mastery of language have a transcendental condition of their own, and that condition is conversation.

### **Conversation as the Original Situation**

Why conversation? Conversation is fundamental for Taylor's understanding of language, which is far removed from the structuralist point of view, despite their common point of departure, i.e., that "to study persons is to study beings who only exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language" [Taylor 2001, 35]. His Humboldtian claim is that both language and us are "made and remade" *in conversation* because of its very nature:

the very nature of a conversation requires a recognition of individual speakers and their different perspectives. The speech situation cannot be thought of as built out of casually related monologues; but neither can it be thought of as the deployment of a supersubject or the unfolding of a structure. Common space is constituted by speakers who join their perspectives, and to this end speakers must remain ever at least tacitly aware of them. 'Shifter' words like "I," "you," "here," "there" play a crucial role in inaugurating and maintaining common space. It is interesting that children learn these very easily and early [Taylor 2001, 525].

That this tacit awareness that comes about through the learning of the use of pronouns in the original, foundational situation of conversation; that language and recognition of the other go hand in hand; these are points also poignantly made by Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*. He points out that one of the first lessons language has to teach is the *reversibility* of roles, as witnessed in the interchange of personal pronouns. When I say "you", the person I'm addressing understands "I", and vice-versa. At the same time, language as discourse teaches us the *nonsubstitutibility* of the persons who play the roles marked out by personal pronouns – Ricoeur portrays this phenomenon as the anchoring of the "I" in use. My unique perspective on the world remains intact: "Because of this anchoring I do not leave my place and I do not eliminate the distinction between here and there, even when I place myself in the place of the other in imagination and in sympathy" [Ricoeur 1995, 193]. Thus, language (as dialogue) teaches that "we are all individuals," revealing another paradox of the human condition, i.e., the constant tension between autonomy and community.

Taylor makes repeated references here to what he calls “the original situation” in which the question of human identity arises, i.e., in which the question “Who am I?” is asked, and that basic, original situation is two people talking to each other. Compare (the italics are mine):

“My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am. And this question finds its *original sense* in the interchange of speakers.” [Taylor 2001, 35]

“A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'. It is this *original situation* which gives its sense to our concept of 'identity', offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of where I am speaking from and to whom.” [Taylor 2001, 36]

“What I have been trying to suggest in this discussion is that these two dimensions of identity-definition reflect the *original situation* out of which the whole issue of identity arises.” [Taylor 2001, 36]

“...what I have called the *original* situation of identity-formation.” [Taylor 2001, 37]

“The *original* and (ontogenetically) inescapable context of such relating is the face-to-face one in which we actually agree.” [Taylor 2001, 38].

The idea of entering a conversation as the pre-condition for attaining selfhood is not new. It is crucial to much of modern hermeneutical thought, including Hans-Georg Gadamer and the above mentioned Paul Ricoeur. The basic language situation is always that of dialogue: an exchange of “question and answer in which roles are continually reversed” [Ricoeur 1995, 339]. Even if, as all practices, it can be learned, absorbed, and internalized, and hence performed alone, the original speech situation is that of dialogue. As a result, we can say that even a monologue presupposes an audience.<sup>4</sup> Thus, even if the conversation that includes the question “Who am I?” is conceived, as in Plato, as the

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4 Further, this theme of language as imposing dialogue subtly weaves its way through *Oneself as Another* from the very first study until the last, from Strawson's ascriptions until the onto-ethical determinations of the self in the works of Husserl and Levinas. Ricoeur draws the following conclusion from *Individuals*: “There is no self alone at the start; the ascription to others is just as primitive as the ascription to oneself. I cannot speak meaningfully of my thoughts unless I am able at the same time to ascribe them potentially to someone else” [Ricoeur 1995, 38].

soul's dialogue with itself, or as Ricoeur's bare question without an answer, it's *original* context is that of dialogue. If a question is asked, an answer is expected. A question presupposes and requires an addressee.<sup>5</sup>

But here, in Taylor's text, this idea of the *original situation* takes on more than this abstract sense. First of all, Taylor means to highlight the fact that my self-definition is something achieved socially: it is by talking to others, those I love and those important to me, that I locate myself within a social network, "in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions" [Taylor 2001, 35]. In other words, I am a self only within 'webs of interlocution,' "in relation to certain interlocutors," certain important conversation partners [Taylor 2001, 36]. I am a social animal, defined by the place I take among others and the links I create with them.

Yet this basic fact about human identity hinges upon language. Those links and their very nature are the stuff of speech, or rather, the stuff of conversation. Taylor's reasoning runs thus: 1) human beings are self-interpreting animals, who are "partly constituted by a certain language," 2) "A language only exists and is maintained within a language community," and thus 3) human beings exist as selves "only among other selves" [Taylor 2001, 35]. So the *original situation* also emerges here as an elaboration of the second premise: it is the situation of the acquisition of a language. In other words, "there is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language" [Taylor 2001, 35].

### **Acquiring Language from Others**

"A language"? It is perhaps useful to clarify at this point how Taylor balances the search for the general, transcendental conditions of personhood, with the very material conditions of working out one's

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5 As such, it is also always a performative: it is an inquiry. Thus it reveals the original role of language, which arguably came about as the most effective way of *doing* something, e.g. warning or inquiring (as opposed to simply referring, as denotative theories of meaning would have it).

particular identity. For Taylor, it is always “my” selfhood, “my” identity, and “Who am I?” – ‘mineness’ is ineradicable in his texts. And it is never language he writes of, but *a* language, a “certain” or “particular” language. In this way he acknowledges the fact that, ultimately, who I am will depend not just on language in general and the possibilities of articulation it creates, but my particular language with the particular structures and words it provides, the language of my particular community in which its values and standards and my values and standards get worked out, and it will depend on the particular people, the people important to me, who are part of my webs of interlocution.<sup>6</sup>

How then, is language and meaning acquired? The original, “ontogenetically inescapable context” is that we learn language from others: “We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up” [Taylor 2001, 35]. There are several elements worth exploring in this particular quote: the element of being *brought into* a conversation, the fact that the conversation is *ongoing*, and the fact that these are languages of *moral and spiritual* discernment that we are learning.

Let us start with the idea of being brought into language. A child learns the meanings of words and the names of objects by accepting the definitions, ostensive and otherwise, given by its parents, its first conversationalists. This is a basic fact about language learning that gives us the fundamental Wittgensteinian insight into the nature of language itself: there is no other way to communicate but through basic

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6 This is not to say that Taylor espouses the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or, in other words, linguistic determinism, even though Humboldt, on whom he relies so much, saw language as the expression of the spirit of a nation. There is an ongoing debate between linguistic universalists and relativists, but it could be said that most linguists admit that there is a correlation and support a non-deterministic, weak version of the theory. See, for example, Koerner, E.F.K. “Towards a Full ‘Pedigree’ of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: from Locke to Lucy” Chapter in Pütz, Martin; Verspoor, Marjolyn, eds. (2000), *Explorations in Linguistic Relativity*, John Benjamins Publishing Company. What is important to remember in the context of Taylor's text is that Humboldt, Wittgenstein, and today's cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff would all agree that the particular language used by an individual and the cultural metaphors used in that particular language reveal something about the way the speakers of that language think.

agreement on meanings.<sup>7</sup> “The meanings that the key words first had for me are the meanings they have for *us*, that is, for me and my conversation partners together” [Taylor 2001, 35]. The *us* which implies the sharing of meaning is crucial here. As Taylor stresses here, there is a difference between something being an object of attention for me and also being an object of attention for you, and the situation where we together focus our attention on the object. In his “Theories of Meaning” he gives the illustrative example of a hot train carriage: even though everyone is aware of the uncomfortable heat, the saying of “Whew, it's hot!” changes the situation. There is no revelation of information, but there is the creation of public space.<sup>8</sup> We are now experiencing this heat together: “this matter of the heat/ discomfort is now in a public space between us, which I have set up by my expression and gesture” [Taylor 2005b, 264]. This common space, the common focusing of attention is the result of language use, it is “set up, instituted, focused, or activated” through it [Taylor 2001, 35]. But a hermeneutic circle comes into play here. Research shows that language acquisition itself depends on the existence of such a space: babies learn language through game-like “formats,” “built on the establishing and enjoyment and celebration of sustained eye-to-eye contact” with the parent or caregiver, which allows such a common space to develop around an object [Taylor 2001, 524].

But the idea of key words first having the meaning they have for *us* together goes beyond the simple establishment of the connection between word and physical object that is the child's first step in language acquisition. This is also true of more abstract concepts: “I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are through my and others' experience of these being objects for *us*” [Taylor 2001, 35]. How so?

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7 Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* always do seem to hover in the background of Taylor's texts on language.

8 The establishment of public space is the second of the three language functions discussed by Taylor in “Theories of Meaning,” in answer to the question: “What are we bringing about in language and essentially through language, i.e. such that it can only be brought about through language?” [Taylor 2005b, 256] The other two are: giving definite contours to ideas through formulation/articulation and making the discriminations which are foundational to human concerns. [Taylor 2005b, 263] All of these, as we shall soon see, play a part in the establishment of selfhood.

In discussing the HHH theory of language<sup>9</sup> in “Theories of Meaning” Taylor points out that learning about such emotions, and about even more specifically human emotions such as indignation or shame, is connected with the first language function of verbalization/articulation, as well as with the third function, where language “also provides the medium through which some of our most important concerns, the characteristically human concerns, can impinge on us at all” [Taylor 2005b, 260]. This means that, first of all, certain human emotions come about through their very expression, and, second of all, that language is the basis of making the finer discriminations between emotions involving the recognition of standards (i.e., anger vs indignation).

### **Common Criteria**

That argument, however, focused more on language already had than on language in the process of being acquired. Here, in *Sources of the Self*, the stress is more on how these meanings come about, how they are articulated in the first place, and how they are learned.<sup>10</sup> So what does it mean to know what love, anger, anxiety are? Taylor's point is that I can only learn what these are by becoming part of a community in which they are experienced and defined. In a sense, this point was already made by Taylor in “Theories of Meaning” in his overthrowing of the Quinean idea of the detached monolingual observer:

Thus you understand the key terms to the extent that you have some grasp of what would be the appropriate thing for a participant to do in certain situations. This is an essential condition of anything we would count as grasping some social practice; and the same point can be made about the horizon of concern. You have no grasp on the conception of honour of a foreign society, if you have no idea of what is suitable and what unsuitable, what is a bigger derogation than what, what must be done to expiate, and so on. [Taylor 2005b, 280].

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9 Taylor means non-designative, or expressivist, theories of language. HHH stands for Herder, Humboldt, and Hamann (or, alternatively, Heidegger) [Taylor 2005b, 255].

10 And thus on how personhood can only come about *with* language, emerge together *with* language, and not just *through* language. Language is not all encompassing here, but it is more than a medium.

Such is the grammar of honor, as Wittgenstein might say, with his broad understanding of grammar and his famous claim that “essence is expressed by grammar.”<sup>11</sup> Stanley Cavell, another philosopher much concerned with the relations between selfhood and speech, elaborates on that Wittgensteinian idea in much the same vein as Taylor in the above passage, going so far as to say that *to know what something is is to know what something is called* – and by this he means knowing how to appropriately use the word for this something in a sentence: “To know how to use the word ‘anger’ is to know what *anger* is” [Cavell 1999, 185]. Taylor uses Wittgenstein’s dictum that agreement in meanings involves agreement in judgments to further link language and agent: “you understand the key terms to the extent that you have some grasp of what would be the appropriate thing for a participant to do in certain situations” [Taylor 2005b, 280]. We can say that they both follow Wittgenstein in asserting that having a concept of something is in its most basic sense very much connected with understanding its grammatical criteria – how it relates to other concepts and how it is used within our linguistic system and our linguistic community [Cavell 1999, 72-77]. Grammar means here the application of criteria to decide if something “counts” as something. To “count as” is taken to mean to “be” in the grammatical sense – the “be” of classification rather than ontology [Cavell 1999, 111]. Crucially, this kind of classification can only happen on the basis of criteria already established by the speaking community. Hence, we are “brought into” an *ongoing* conversation, and we can only understand what honor is in the above example by being “brought into” the community, by entering into a conversation about it, by having it explained, by asking the native speakers of this language for clarification. The situation of a child and that of a language learner are thus similar in this respect. Conversations “fix” the language, i.e., attach meanings to words.

Another important point Taylor makes about the way we are “brought into” conversation, or initiated into participation in language, is the significance of names. “My name is what I am ‘called’”. A human being *has* to have a name, because he or she has to be *called*, i.e. addressed” [Taylor 2001, 525]. And so our earliest interlocutors call us

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11 Section 371 of *Philosophical Investigations*.

into “the ongoing conversation” by giving us a name, thus making us members of the speaking community, people who can be addressed. This act of baptism as the act of originally calling someone into conversation emerges as the precondition for developing a human identity. With it, we enter what Cavell calls “the shared realm of reason” [Cavell 2006, 188]. Without it, we are just numbers on a list, without identity. Taylor stresses the difference between being referred to and being addressed: “Numbers tag people for easy reference, but what you use to address a person is his name” [Taylor 2001, 525]. That is why, as Taylor points out, the name is in many cultures thought to encapsulate the essence or the identity of a person.

Can this be so? Cavell draws our attention to the fact that Shakespearean tragedy and comedy<sup>12</sup> are filled with this very possibility: (they) “are therefore so often about the learning of a name, or learning the equation of two names. The not knowing the equation, and then the learning, precipitates catastrophes or diversions of catastrophe. The drama turns upon whether the assimilation will come *in time* [Cavell 1999, 388/9]. But for Cavell this points to the irony of human identity, contained in the tension between the possibility of the key to one's identity being locked in one's name and the feeling that I am not limited to all the “descriptions the world gives of me to me” [Cavell 1999, 390]. For now, let us note that for that question of identity to arise in the first place, I must be called into conversation (by name), i.e., brought into a community of speakers.

Finally, it is not just a language that a child learns, but a language of “*moral and spiritual discernment*.” As already mentioned, this idea is very much connected with the third language function as described by Taylor in “Theories of Meaning,” where language is shown to be the basis of all fundamental human concerns:

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12 Shakespeare is of great philosophical interest to Cavell, especially in view of his thesis about the continuing significance of skepticism in modern philosophy. In the introduction to his seminal book of essays, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cavell writes: “My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes” [Cavell 2003, 3].

Thus man is a language animal, not just because he can formulate things and make representations, and thus think of matters and calculate, which animals cannot; but also because what we consider the essential human concerns are disclosed only in language, and can only be the concerns of a language animal. [Taylor 2005b, 263]

Those “essentially human concerns” are very much moral concerns. To tell the difference between such feelings/terms as “anger” and “indignation” one needs to make judgments concerning norms. “Indignation” is what is felt when someone has acted wrongly, unjustly. And, crucially, norms or standards need to be articulated/acknowledged in some form in order to exist *as* standards.<sup>13</sup> The cat may be using some sort of standard in always choosing the good fish over the bad, but the cat does not realize that it is in fact applying a standard [Taylor 2005b, 261]. With people, a ‘good’ pattern of behavior is not enough to induce us to consider a subject a moral subject: one can be, in fact, benevolent for selfish reasons. It is the application and recognition of standards that makes one a moral subject, but that requires language, requires expressive behavior. “The very notion of an agent recognizing standards which are neither articulated nor acknowledged anywhere in expressive activity makes no sense. In what could this recognition consist? What would make it, even for the creature himself, a recognition of *right* and *wrong*?” [Taylor 2005b, 262]. If a standard is to exist as a standard, it must be expressed, and, consequently, it must be up for discussion with others. Moral criteria, just as grammatical criteria, are forged in conversation. And thus one's stand on moral matters, i.e., one's orientation towards the good, which had been Taylor's point of departure in the first place, is shown to have its roots in that *original situation* of dialogue.

### **The Continual Effort of Articulation**

Thus we can clearly see how a child is initiated into personhood through language, specifically, through dialogue. But a human identity is not given once and for all; it continually emerges as the answer to the

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13 In his thinking about standards Taylor follows Harry Frankfurt's distinction between first and second-order desires. See Taylor's essay “What is Human Agency?” for details [Taylor 2005c, 15-20].

question “Who am I?”, and so, Taylor points out, this dimension of interlocution should not be treated as if it “were of significance only for the genesis of individuality, like the training wheels of nursery school, to be left behind and to play no part in the finished person” [Taylor 2001, 36]. Just as language can only exist and be maintained within a language community, so does the self. The idea that continually emerges here is the idea that conversation fixes meanings, making them (more or less) permanent and shared, and that without it the child and the adult alike would be at a loss: there would be no moral standards, no clarity of ideas or feelings, no self-knowledge: “everything would be confusion” [Taylor 2001, 36]. The seemingly independent adult still needs to articulate his own feelings in order to understand them (this is stressed in “Theories of Meaning”),<sup>14</sup> and what is more, he needs to do it in conversation with others (this is stressed here): “Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity” [Taylor 2001, 36]. I need this other, my other, to verify my criteria for me. Thus, to whom I’m speaking, who my inherited/chosen speech community is, however large or small, will play a large part in my self constitution as a person.<sup>15</sup> Taylor finishes the passage: “This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one's own” [Taylor 2001, 36].

Thus my webs of interlocution continually form my identity as

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14 Again, the first function of language as described there is connected with articulation as a way of giving contours to vague ideas or feelings.

15 It seems that what Taylor is suggesting is degrees of attunement: the finer the attunement in judgements with people within my webs of interlocution, the better the communication. After all, “speaking the same language” can have a metaphorical meaning. We may not be “speaking the same language” even if we are both speaking English. Our frames of reference may have been formed by (vastly) different environments, and the norms and standards worked out in our respective communities may have been too different for us to ever truly agree in judgements and agree in meanings. This idea is explored by Stanley Cavell as a way of understanding Wittgensteinian fragility of language, the fragility of our criteria and the very possibility of communication: the criteria are based on our shared forms of life, our “agreements in judgements,” which are pervasive, but never assured. Skepticism is always a threat, and overcoming it is always a choice and a responsibility. See Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, especially p 369.

they shape and then reshape my language of self definition. The idea that language is “made and remade” in conversation is taken from Humboldt [Taylor 2001, 525]. Conversation has the potential for transforming meanings just as much as for fixing them. This tension at the heart of language is a tension just as much between language fixed and developing, or inherited and authentic (Cavell), or spoken and speaking speech (Merleau-Ponty), as between the fixedness and unfixeness of human identity, its irony, to recall Cavell again.

The value of the way Taylor develops this Merleau-Pontian theme lies in the way he stresses and explores the aspect of fixedness, or rather of the rooting in what is common, before any breaking away or change is made possible. His point is that we are always caught in the webs of interlocution, always are a part of a conversation: that is the inescapable background, the transcendental condition of humanity, regardless of the ideals of individuality that may be predominant in modern society. In other words, first, I must inherit the language, take it on, accept it. “Later, I may innovate” [Taylor 2001, 35].

Whether I want to “develop an understanding of myself in sharp disagreement with my family and background” [Taylor 2001, 35] or want to take a heroic stance, standing out and standing against my community, like Socrates and the Old Testament prophets, or feel, like Nietzsche, that I have found “a new truth about the human condition that no one else has seen” [Taylor 2001, 37], “it remains true that one can elaborate one's new language only through conversation in a broad sense, that is, through some kind of interchange with others with whom one has some common understanding about what is at stake in the enterprise” [Taylor 2001, 37]. If it is society at large I am escaping, I will still seek to be a part of a group of “like-minded souls,” such as philosophers. In extreme cases, these conversationalists of mine may even be dead, as long as I can “assume their tacit agreement that I see their thought and language bespeak contact with the same reality” [Taylor 2001, 38].

If my language does not bespeak contact with the same reality as anyone else's, I have no language. Even if I am Nietzsche, or Emerson,

or Thoreau, for whom the ideal was to shun society and its ways of speaking, I cannot find authentic expression beyond a human language. I still write, and I still hold my audience “to be (unwitting and unwilling) witnesses to my insight” [Taylor 2001, 37]. Again, “the drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others” [Taylor 2001, 37]. Taylor drives home again and again the point about the potency of Wittgenstein's no-private-language arguments. Acknowledgement/recognition/confirmation of a common horizon of sense are vital for any possession of language.

It is this witnessing by others that assures I am not mad. Taylor insists that “somehow I have to meet the challenge: Do I know what I'm saying? Do I really grasp what I'm talking about? And this challenge I can only meet by confronting my thought and language with the thought and reactions of others” [Taylor 2001, 37]. The idea that if I do not meet this challenge, I am mad indeed, in that I fall beyond “the rational realm of reason” and I cannot make myself understood, to myself and others, is very cleverly explored in Cavell's analyses of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Imp of the Perverse*, a story which is an ironic commentary on the dark side of the Romantic drive to absolute independence. Cavell sums up the human need to tell, to recount one's story, to communicate one's identity in words that resonate closely with Taylor's point: what we want is

a recounting beginning from the circumstances that it is I, some I or other, who counts, who is able to do the thing of counting, of conceiving a world, that it is I who, taking others into account, establish criteria for what is worth saying, hence for the intelligible. But this is only on the condition that I count, that I matter, that it matters that I count in my agreement or attunement with those with whom I maintain my language, from whom this inheritance – language as the condition of counting – comes (...). If my counting fails to matter, I am mad [Cavell 1994, 127].

It is the “transcendental condition” of our having a grasp on our own language “that we in some fashion confront it or relate it to the language of others” [Taylor 2001, 38]. And it is the transcendental condition of our humanity that we have such a grasp, as only through

that grasp we can answer the question "Who am I?" by relating to others and to the good.

### **Further Questions**

Where does that truth leave us? If having a grasp on our language is so fundamental, if lack of intelligibility can be portrayed as madness, or as complete confusion, then should we not be more concerned with the ways in which we 'have language'? After all, if the human ability to speak is the underlying feature behind self-interpretation, morality, and community – all important components of identity in Taylor's view – then the very way we 'have language' will strongly impact the way we 'have selves'. To paraphrase Cavell, philosophy of selfhood needs to bear "on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words" [Cavell 2002, xxiv]. Language theory must thus become an important element of considerations on human identity and selfhood. And it must answer the darker questions about the possibilities of misunderstanding and misspeaking just as thoroughly as those focusing on successful communication. As well as questions about the price of speech, the possible distortions it may cause, the compromises between individuality and intelligibility that one must make if one is to speak at all. Tensions which we encounter when discussing personal identity or selfhood, such as between its fixedness and unfixedness, are the same tensions that we find at the heart speech. If conversation is the transcendental condition of identity, it is also a potentially painful condition, and this is something that has only been signaled at the end of the above discussion. Its difficulties and stakes still require further investigation.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WHO AM I? TAYLOR'S SELFHOOD AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL CONDITION OF CONVERSATION**

Through a close reading of a small section of *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, this paper aims to highlight what is, in the author's view, a particularly significant aspect of Charles Taylor's conception of the constitution of selfhood. Namely, its entanglement in speech. "We don't have selves in the way we have hearts and livers", Taylor argues. We 'have selves' through the constant effort of articulation, which we are only capable of because we learned it from and with others in what Taylor calls the *original situation* of conversation. If the human ability to speak is the underlying feature behind self-interpretation, morality, and community – all important components of identity in Taylor's view – then the very way we 'have language' will strongly impact the way we 'have selves'. Language theory must thus become an important element of considerations on human identity and selfhood.

**KEYWORDS:** Charles Taylor, identity, selfhood, speech, language, language theory, human agency, Cavell, Wittgenstein

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Charles Taylor, tożsamość, podmiot, mowa, język, teoria języka, Cavell, Wittgenstein