

The Philosophy of Charles Taylor

I would like to start this lecture with expressing my belief that Charles Taylor is – without exaggeration – the leading personality of the contemporary Canadian philosophy. He is the author of many articles and books concerning the history of philosophy and the philosophy of language and but also dealing with political and moral philosophy. He was born in Quebec anglophone family, and in Montreal (montrio:l) he was studying philosophy, economy and political sciences at Mc Gill University. In 1960 he was conferred upon a degree Master of Arts at Oxford University, where he attended the lectures of John Langshaw Austin, the famous British philosopher and the founder of the theory of speech acts. A year later, in 1962, he was there conferred upon the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

From the beginning of his academic life he was for a long time Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford University and a fellow of *All Souls College*. He has also taught at Princeton, the University of California at Berkeley and has lectured at many universities around the world. For many years he has been Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at McGill University in Montreal (montrio:l) (since the year two thousand and two as Professor Emeritus (i:'meritus)). He supports the idea of maximum decentratization of Canada, but on the other hand he is assertive oponent of Quebec separatism. He promotes his political views as a member of the federal committee of the *New Democratic Party of Canada* (kaenede)

In his theoretical-philosophical conceptions – concretely in his view on the connection of language and practical activities – he has been influenced by John Langshaw Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. From the point of his political and social philosophy it is interesting - that although he is deeply believed Catholic (kaeselik), he was in a certain extent inspired by the philosophical stream of neomarxism (ni: omaksizem), especially by the theories following so called young Marx, for instance by philosophy of G. Lukács or by philosophy of Frankfurt school (I mean for instance Max Horkheimer or Jürgen Habermas). In this context Taylor is interested in the notion of alienation („Entfremdung“), the problem of the loss of sense, his quest and his new retrieval. A certain influence of neomarxism (ni: omaksizem), which was connected with the reflection on liberty and individuality of human being in Western society, leads him to Hegel’s philosophy. I quote from Taylor’s excellent monograph *Hegel* first published in 1975: - „Hegel’s philosophy is an important step in the development of the modern notion of freedom. He helped to develop a conception of freedom as total self-creation, which only needed to be transposed on man to push the conception of freedom to its ultimate dilemma. But most important of all, the contemporary attempt to go beyond this dilemma, to situate subjectivity by relating it to our life as embodied and social beings, without reducing it to a function of objectified nature, constantly refers us back to Hegel“. the end of quotation) p. 570

Taylor was successfull - and it is his great merit - in eliminating a certain British (or Anglo-Saxon) tradition of shallow critique and depreciating of Hegel, which was started by

Cambridge philosophers Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore. Taylor devoted to Hegel two monographs: (the first I have already mentioned: this is his extensive book *Hegel* (1975)) and the second is *Hegel and the Modern Society* (first published in 1979). He was especially interested by a great significance of Hegel's category of „Anerkennung“ - recognition for both the life of the individual human being and for the life of society. Under Hegel's influence Taylor emphasizes the term *Sittlichkeit* against Kant's notion of Moralität. Namely moralität means in Kant's conception an abstract, formal notion of moral obligation, which holds of man as an individual, and which being defined in contrast to nature is in endless opposition to what is. So when we speak about Kant's notion of Moralität, we have an obligation to realize something which does not exist but what ought to be.

The term *Sittlichkeit* has been variously translated into English as „ethical life“, „objective ethics“, „concrete ethics“, but no translation can capture the sense of this term. Therefore Taylor uses the original term *Sittlichkeit*. *Sittlichkeit* is the usual German term for ethics, with the same kind of etymological origin, in the term Sitten, which we might translate as customs, manner, observance. But Hegel gives this term a special sense. *Sittlichkeit* refers to the moral obligations I have to an ongoing community of which I am part. The crucial characteristic of *Sittlichkeit* is that it enjoins (in'džojnz) us to bring about what already is. On the contrary to Kant - in Hegel's conception - our moral life is historically and socially conditioned. So *Sittlichkeit* represents historical and theoretical starting point of communitarian view of social reality in political philosophy of Charles Taylor.

When we speak about the field of methodology of humanities and epistemology, Charles Taylor is the real pioneer of the new trends in Anglo-American and Canadian, but also world philosophy. He criticised the neo-positivist (ni:opozitivist) methodology in social sciences and has introduced new methods of investigating the social reality. In this philosophical and historical context there is very significant his essay *Interpretation and the Sciences of Man* which was originally published in *Review of Metaphysics* in 1971.

In this essay he has argued against the possibility of an „objective“, „value-free“ explanation of events and social practises. He, as well as Anglo-American theorists Alasdair MacIntyre and Peter Winch, emphasizes the situated character of social scientific understanding. It is obvious that Taylor's conception of the methodology of social sciences is especially influenced by Wittgenstein's theory of language games and **Gadamer's Hermeneutics**. Social reality, the actions, practices, and norms which the social sciences investigate, are - in Taylor's view - constituted within *semantic fields* and, as a result, the possibility of understanding them depends upon familiarity with the relevant language games and their interrelated meanings.

To mention only one of Taylor's examples, understanding a certain act of a gesture of deference (degerens) requires seeing it in its relations to the ideas of courtesy and respect, in its contrast to acts of insolence and defiance, and, indeed, in its connection to hierarchical relationships and institutions of social power.

(Ch. Taylor: „Interpretation and the Sciences of Man.“ In: *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. Ed. by Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. Mc. Carthy. Notre Dame – London, Notre Dame University Press 1977, s. 107.+

Without a familiarity with this „web of meaning“ within which the social act is defined, it cannot be understood as the particular gesture that it is. Taylor argues that understanding the meaning of an action, social practice or social norm involves understanding the range of related and contrasting meanings that form the context of the investigating phenomena.

So what is in Taylor’s view the distinguishing mark of social sciences? I would say that the distinguishing mark of the social sciences is their particular semantic field which is relevant for **understanding** of the society or community under study. Taylor, as well as Anglo-American philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre and Peter Winch, points not only to the language game that constitutes a given social science at a particular time but also to the language game or semantic field that constitutes its object-domain.

It is obvious that as early as at the beginning of 1970s Taylor came from anti-positivistic (antipositivistic) tradition, influenced by L. Wittgenstein and later by **hermeneutical philosophy of H.-G. Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas**. Taylor has been aware that understanding of the social phenomena is bound on the concrete situation and the system of norms in a given community. This is just this boundness of discourses or notions, used by the participants of the particular social group or culture, on concrete situations and attitudes in the framework of

practical activities, which is called by Wittgenstein language game and by Taylor semantic field.

Taylor argues that social reality is constituted by intersubjective meanings, which are based on special connection of lingual and practical activities, which characterize particular cultures, social and political groups.

In this context we can infer the basic points of Taylor's theory of understanding and interpretation:

1. Language in the form of intersubjective meanings constitutes social reality, it is essential for its inner characteristics.

2. the methodology of inquiry of the social reality is different from the methodology of natural sciences. In Taylor's view the methodology of social sciences must take into account the constitutive role of the language of semantic fields and intersubjective meanings in interhuman relations and the role of practical social activities in a framework of particular social reality. Since social reality has the character of practical activities, it cannot be separated from language, from language games, which depict the function of these practical activities.

3. the basis of understanding is not represented by inner mental states, but by intersubjective meanings. These meanings cannot be grasped by the methods of social reality inquiry, which were introduced by positivistic tradition. Taylor means in this context for instance the quantitative methods leading to the so called brute data. According the positivist conceptions bruta data ought to be that could serve as the undoubtful basis for the verification of our theories.

Beginning in the second half of 1980s, Taylor also provides his **conception of understanding with a deep ethical dimension** and as a consequence of this, he is more and more influenced by Heidegger's existentialism and Augustinian (o:ges'tinjen) Christian philosophy. He constructs his concept of understanding with the reflection of the temporal and spacial structure of being in the world. **Understanding is therefore the ability of moral orientation in the world along with the projection of a future being.**

This moral orientation can be in a transcendental dimension comprehended as a movement in moral space aiming towards the future 25)

According to Taylor our place in the world is constantly challenged by the new events of our lives, as well as constantly under potential revision, as we experience more and mature. So the issue for us has to be not only where we are, but where we are going, and though the first may be a matter of more or less, the latter is a question of towards or away from, an issue of yes or no. That is why an absolute question always frames our relative ones.

I must say that Taylor is able to synthesize (sinsisajz) the ontological problematic (probli'maetik) with the ethical one. According to him since we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and since we cannot be indifferent to our place relative to this good, and since this place is something that must always change and become, the issue of the direction of our lives must arise for us. It has been often remarked that making sense of

one's life as a story requires - that we must take into account that our lives exist also in the space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.

However, **understanding** and our moral orientation to the good is possible only in the world, which have not lost its meanings, and therefore has not lost its sense. Taylor argues there is a certain danger of the loss of sense as the consequence of the instrumental attitudes and modes of behaviour to other people, to our social world.

What is in Taylor's view so called instrumental society? It is such a society in which a utilitarian value outlook is entrenched in the institutions of a commercial and finally a bureaucratic mode of existence. It is obvious that instrumental society tends to empty life of its richness, depth, or meaning. So there is no room for heroism (heroism), or aristocratic virtue, or high purposes of life, or things worth dying for. Nothing is left which can give life a deep and powerful sense of purpose, very often we can speak only about an overriding concern with material things and comfort (kamfet). There we can see a source of criticism frequently levelled at consumer society.

Charles Taylor uses in his book *Sources of the Self* the notion of Max Weber „Entzauberung“, *disenchantment* of the world to express the essential features and historical causes of this loss of sense and meaning. The world, from being a locus (lokes) of „magic“, or the sacred (sejkrid), or the ideas, comes simply to be seen as a neutral domain (de'mein) of potential means to our purposes. In Taylor's view the loss of meaning can be formulated

in terms of division or fragmentation: „To take an instrumental stance (staens) to nature is to cut us off from the sources of meaning in it. An instrumental stance to our own feelings divides us within, splits reason from sense. And the atomistic focus on our individual goals dissolves community and divides us from each other.“ (**Sources of the Self**, p. 500).

As Taylor points out the problem of the new retrieval (ri'tri:vl) of the sense of our life, the overcoming of the fragmentation of our community was articulated for instance by German poet Friedrich Schiller, but it was also taken up by Karl Marx and later by Gyorg Lukács, Theodor Wiesegrund Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, as well as in the student movement of May 1968.

In the book *Sources of the Self* Taylor also attempted to depict the essential features of modern subjectivity. He comes to the opinion that modern subjectivity has its roots in the concepts of human good. The turn of the modern human being into inwardness (inwednis) is the result of our aim to reach and comprehend the good, and also to define it. In this context Taylor refuses the opinion that the emphasis on man's identity leads to mere subjectivism or nihilism. He finds the way to the definition of good in the dimension of ordinary and everyday life. As Taylor points out it was René Descartes who had a great merit for the development of modern subjectivity. Descartes insisted that the sources of morals, as well as the sources of knowledge must be sought exclusively within us. We can observe the similar following process by Rousseau – in his philosophy our moral values are released more and more from the domination of our outer standards and norms. De facto (di. faectou) Rousseau

comes to the similar conclusion as Taylor does: „the inner voice of my true sentiments defines what is the good“ (the end of quotation) *Sources of the Self*, p. 362. Rousseau frequently presents the issue of morality as that of our following a voice of nature within us. Our moral salvation comes from recovering authentic moral conduct with ourselves.

I would like to emphasize that Charles Taylor in the context of his reflections concerning the good and essential ethical problems of the modern world, pays a great attention to the problems of mutual recognition and the crisis of modern identity in our social and political life. In his essay „The politics of Recognition“ Taylor argues that we can distinguish two changes that together have made the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition inevitable. The first is the collapse of social hierarchies, which used to be the basis for honor. Taylor is using the term *honor* in the *ancient régime* sense in which it is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honour in this sense, it is essential that not everyone have it. This is the sense in which Montesquieu uses it in his description of monarchy. Honor is intrinsically a matter of „préférences“. (Montesquieu *On the Spirit of the Law*, Book 3, chapter 7).

Against this conservative notion of honour, we have – according to Taylor - the modern notion of dignity, now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent „dignity of human beings“, or of citizen dignity. The underlying premise here is that everyone shares in it. Taylor is convinced that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible (kempäettable) with a democratic society, and that it was

inevitable that the old concept of honor was superseded (sjúpe'sídid).

When we speak about the term recognition, the importance of recognition has been modified and intensified by the new understanding of individual identity that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century. As Taylor argues – we might speak of an individual identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself. This notion arises along with an ideal, that of being true to myself and my own particular way of being. One way of describing its development is to see its starting point in the eighteenth-century notion that human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong. The idea was that understanding right and wrong was not a matter of dry calculation, but was anchored (aenked) in our feelings. Morality has, in a sense, a voice within (wi'din).

So - it was a starting point to a new concept of authenticity (o: sen'tisity) and inwardness

Taylor shows that the notion of authenticity (o: sen'tisity) develops out of a displacement of the moral accent in this idea. On the original view, the inner voice was important because it tells us what the right thing to do is. As Charles Taylor points out - being in touch with our moral feelings matters here, as a means to the aim of acting rightly. What Taylor is calling the displacement of the moral accent comes about when being in touch with our feelings takes on independent and crucial moral significance. It comes to be something we have to attain if we are to be true and full human beings.

To be aware what is new here, Taylor argues – we have to see the analogy to earlier moral views, where being in touch with

some source – for example, God, or the idea – was considered essential to full being. But now the source we have to connect with - is deep within (wi'din) us. This fact is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness (inwednis), in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths. On Taylor's view the origin of inwardness was connected with the gradual subjectivization (sabžiktivizejšn) of the human individuality and formation of its inner life. The modern turn inward is according to him the result of our long efforts to define and reach the good.

However, - in Taylor's view – this idea that the source is within, does not exclude our being related to God or the Ideas, it can be considered our proper way of relating to them. In a sense, it can be seen as just a continuation and intensification of the development inaugurated by Christian philosopher Saint Augustine (Saint o:gastin), who saw the road to God as passing through our own self-awareness (e'weenis).

In Taylor's view we cannot grasp and comprehend the modern identity, the understanding of ourselves as the moral subjects, without reference to the history of religion. In order to understand who we are, we must take into account the religious aspects of our modern identity. Namely in Western culture the God is one of the main sources of good and therefore he is also ontological reality. The love to God who is viewed as ontological reality enables to people to act, to carry out the good, and also enables them to be good .

However, Taylor's conception of good is not genuinely theistic (si: 'istik) In the very book *Sources of the Self* he strives to depict comprehensively the sources of modern identity in its

development in the last three centuries. In this context he pays his attention to so called inwardness and to Rousseau's romantic emphasis to unique and different character of the identity of the individual human being in comparison to others. Taylor comprehends modern identity in hermeneutical way, as the processes of self-understanding and self-interpretations in the shape of narratives, which point out to the fundamental, constitutive goods. In this consequence Taylor is working out his moral ontology, which is based on the requirements concerning the respect to life, integrity, dignity and welfare of other human beings.

I would like to tell at the end of my presentation a few words concerning Taylor's political philosophy in connection with the theory of multiculturalism and particular identity of human being. In his essay *The Politics of Recognition* (first published in 1992) Charles Taylor, influenced by Hegel's theory of society, defends a communitarian interpretation of the so called recognition politics and identity politics. What is obvious and at the same time interesting that multiculturalism, multicultural demands for group recognition are connected with the liberal tradition of individual rights. In the article *The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion*, which was published in *Journal of Democracy* in 1998, Taylor characterizes his political philosophy as - I quote: - „a somewhat more complex and many-stranded version of Liberalism“ (p. 22). Along with it he is attempting to reconstruct a theoretical justification for the conception of the legal dignity“ of different cultures. And he is also convinced that the principle of human dignity can itself be

properly termed liberal. But from that reason he refuses such conception of liberal philosophy as a philosophy based on the outdated notion of atomistic, antisocial individualism.

In Taylor's view - on the contrary to this atomistic conception - the most typical feature of social life, as well as the individual life of the human being is its dialogical character: We define our identity always in dialogue, and sometimes in the dispute with the identities, which our significant other would like to recognize in ourselves. Taylor also argues that there is no such thing as inward generation, monological understood. In order to understand the close connection between identity and recognition, we have to take into account a crucial feature of human condition that has been rendered almost invisible by the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy.

This crucial feature of human life has fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition (aekwi'zišn) of rich human languages of expression. Language is meant here - of course- in a broad sense, including the languages of art, of gesture, of love, and the like.

Taylor points out to the fact that there is a struggle of various conceptions of identities, and we ought to lead perpetual dialogue about them. It certainly means that we must respect various forms of culture and different life styles, different ways of life. This is just the belief on which Taylor originates his concept of multiculturalism. And that kind of humanistic multiculturalism - he actively strives to assert in the political, social and cultural life of Canadian Federation.

