Article

The issue of identity in postmodernity:
authenticity and individualism in Charles Taylor

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Abstract: The collapsing of communitarian relations and the increasing isolation of individuals in relation to each other figure prominently in the studies of various authors who sought to describe contemporary ways of life. We address this issue as presented by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* and in *The ethics of authenticity*. The author identifies three "malaises" that are present in modern society: individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and the alienation of individuals from the political sphere. Proposing to avoid a restrictively negativist reading of such phenomena, Taylor presents them as transformations of the dynamic frameworks that constitute the modern identity. We undertook a study of the notions of identity and authenticity as presented in those books, aiming at a synthetic comprehension of this issue and investigating the possibilities of overcoming it, that is, of recovering the meanings lost by an individualist fragmentation.

Keywords: authenticity, identity, individualism, postmodernity.

Introduction

Known worldwide as an expert in multiculturalism and in Hegel, and influenced by the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein[1], Charles Taylor is one of the leading contemporary living philosophers, having recently received, alongside Habermas, the 2015 Kluge Prize, awarded by the United States Library of Congress.

Charles Taylor is also recognized for his important contributions to the field of Psychology, as his studies address the constitution and the malaise of the contemporary *self*. In particular, in his monumental *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor (1989/2013) articulates the history of the contemporary Western *self* from a moral perspective, more precisely based on what he called constitutive goods or strong evaluations that define and guide subjective behavior in Western culture. According to Montefiore's (1998) commentary, "strong evaluations are those that impact precisely on a whole way of living, of being" (p. 107).

Given the limits and objectives of this study, we will concentrate on *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Taylor, 2011), as it represents a synthesis of the result of *Sources of the Self* (Taylor, 1989/2013), focusing on what the author calls malaises of modernity. Addressing them as a "source of worry,"[2] Taylor (2011) defines such malaises

as "features of our contemporary culture and society that people experience as a loss or a decline, even as our civilization 'develops'" (p. 11). The author recognizes a convergence of discussions on this theme that, in general, revolve around a central idea, which is the individualism of contemporary man. It is, therefore, a subject often approached and revisited, from different perspectives. However, Taylor's reflections differs in its statement of a purpose, prioritizing the search for ways of overcoming, through a strategy that consists in thinking individualism from a longitudinal perspective, considering not only the aspects of loss and decline, but also the possible and legitimate gains linked to what he calls the culture of authenticity. Based on this discussion, we will try to outline how, according to the author, the formulations about personal identity in the context of contemporary society emerge, as well as its relation with the notion of authenticity that derives from them.

Our interest, therefore, turns to one of the central themes of *The ethics of authenticity*, which is understanding the ways of life of the contemporary self in relation to the cultural configurations that support it, understanding that the *malaise* inherent in such ways of life reveals certain limits and tensions within the contemporary notion of personal identity. In this sense, we return to some of the author's previous reflections on the subject, in *Sources of the Self*, in which, at the same time as he investigates the conditions of the origin of the modern configuration, he also lays the foundations of his

understanding of the notion of identity, more specifically the way in which such theme demands treatment within moral philosophy.

Individualism and authenticity

Taylor (2011) identifies three central sources of worry in modernity: individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and the alienation from the political sphere. If the three worries are strongly related, the author recognizes that individualism plays a crucial role in the discussion. Generally speaking, the issue is a way of life excessively focused on the individual level, with the prevalence of the "internal" to the detriment of any relation with or demand from the "exterior." The primacy of instrumental reason, on the other hand, is a second theme whose origin is close to that of individualism, it is its counterpart in the way of thinking and relating to nature and to others. Finally, related to individualism and the primacy of instrumental reason, the author identifies an alienation of the individual from the political sphere, a disinterest and general disbelief in engaging in collective issues, the emblematic expression of which is the emergence of paternalistic, unrepresentative forms of government.

Individualism, therefore, concerns the way of being in which prevails an excessive focus on the intimate sphere, in which the particular always appears to be more important and ultimately more meaningful and purposeful than the collective. It is a stance embedded in the ideals of self-fulfillment, self-sufficiency and free choice. Taylor (2011) attributes the prevalence of such ideals today to an effective break of modern people with restrictive moral horizons. Here the author refers to earlier historical moments in which there was little control of individuals over their way of life. Institutions such as family and religion occupied a central place in both private and communal living, structuring themselves in individual experience as given or, to some extent, undisputed value systems. Thus, there was little mobility, little room for creating and choosing individual values. The way of constituting and living in a family was univocal, a specific arrangement that even prescribed the division of gender duties and responsibilities. The same occurred with religion, which was a central value determined by family and social affiliations prior to any individual's choice of to how to live one's own spirituality. The same could be said about labor relations, affiliations with political movements and other diverse aspects of social life.

From a modern perspective, the possibility of choosing how to live one's life represents an effective gain of freedom, a positive aspect that contemporary people have acquired in comparison with their ancestors. The concept of originality, introduced later in the author's discussion, is somewhat commonplace in our contemporary understanding of subjectivity, referring to the fact that each individual has their own unique way of being human.

From this perspective, the turning point begins with modernity, since the pre-modern world scenario was not conducive to the exercise and development of originality, in the sense of a subjective determination of essentially individual ways of life, that is, which are guided by one's own values. In other words, with the advent of modernity, such restrictive ways of being – not very supportive of the freedom of creation or personal choice – come to be experienced by individuals as situations of suffering resulting from the clash between their individual desires of self-realization and the social values that took the form of imposed norms. It is in this sense that Ehrenberg (2000) elects neurosis as the typical psychopathology of the period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth, since it expresses the conflict between the individual and morals or social norms, especially in evidence in the Victorian era. Now, the loosening of these restrictive values would represent for the modern self the possibility of experiencing personal fulfillment in a more effective or authentic way, and this gain of freedom would thus be equivalent to the possibility of a more meaningful life.

Taylor's (2011) understanding of these issues, however, while on the one hand reserves to modernity the possibility of being right to some extent regarding freedom, differs from a perspective that would see in the passage of the traditional to the modern a simple loosening of the moral limits towards absolute individual freedom. Taylor addresses the issue by investigating the theme of the lived and experienced meaning of the world. In his analysis, what is observed is a displacement of the objective systems of values or of "higher goods" that were previously implicit in the perception of the outside world (the world itself configured and carried such meanings) and that, with the advent of modernity, retreat into the personal sphere (Taylor, 2011).

In other words, it is a question of understanding how the retreat of this field of meanings, which previously corresponded to a transcendent experience and now is increasingly focused on particular spaces and always tending towards the "interior," unfolds in an experience of malaise characteristic of this moment in history (Taylor, 2011). To better situate what is at stake here, let us briefly recall some of the references with which the author dialogues in this path.

The context of Taylor's criticism

The French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), dealing with American democracy in the nineteenth century, already pointed to a life devoid of a higher purpose, interested in "petty" aspects of existence and disconnected from a collective sense or that transcended individual interests (Tocqueville, 1835/2004). In a democracy, man would have lost his sense of concern for others, due to some form of social leveling that, while seeking to ensure equality, has the perverse effect of an excessive self-centering that ultimately leads to disinterest in the other or even in society. Taylor (2011) acknowledges that Tocqueville's

(1835/2004) work precisely anticipates the issue of the malaises of modernity, specifically where it articulates a certain loss of meaning of individual experience with the actual loss of political freedom brought about by widespread alienation from the public sphere.

On the other hand, Taylor (1989/2013) emphasizes the affirmation of ordinary life as one of the central aspects of the constitution of modern identity, characterizing a decisive transference which "displaces the locus of the good life from some special range of higher activities and places it within 'life' itself" (p. 276). Considered in all its breadth, this phenomenon should not be simply viewed from a negative perspective, since it allows not only a loss of meaning through alienation, but also the possibility of an experience more meaningful of ordinary life and work. Beyond the strictly political scope of Tocqueville's reflections, the author draws attention here to the existence of a sense of community preceding the disintegration of this public space for action in the advancement of democratic societies. The problem is less the affirmation of ordinary life than the crumbling of the community dimension of meanings that initially sustained it.

Tocqueville's pessimism also resonates with the criticism of the American historian Christopher Lasch (1932-1994), who uses the term "narcissism" to define the individualistic way of being. In Lasch (1979/1983), we find self-absorption as a psychological counterpart of a withdrawal of a sense of the world, which the author critically and thoroughly explores in various aspects, permeated by self-centering, loss of socialized horizons of meaning, hedonism and immediacy of experience. Lasch emphasizes the need to recognize in contemporary narcissism something that goes beyond a collective manifestation of pure selfishness. He states that the use of the term should not be understood as a mere metaphor, recognizing in it a truly pathological component and making use of a possible approach to the idea of narcissism via psychoanalysis, which in its clinical studies would have captured components of this way of being derived from the culture of narcissism, albeit involuntarily, according to the author.

Taylor (1989/2013) points to the importance of Lasch (1979/1983) in indicating the conditions for the emergence of this new type of "malaise." Displacing the neurotic formations of Freud's classical studies as a characteristic malaise of our times since the second half of the twentieth century would be, according to the historian, the suffering related to the general feeling of emptiness, lack of purpose or futility, which could be identified as a "loss of ego."[3] Taylor (1989/2013) points out, however, that understanding the relationship between these situations and the cultural (or, as he claims, "non-pathological") conditions that apparently enable them requires a clearer explanation of the structures of the self

that is, of the exact configuration that the issue of identity acquires under such conditions, as we will show below.

The widespread divestment of the public and the loss of meaning of the great institutions of social life also appear in Gilles Lipovetsky's (1983/2005) analysis of what he calls hypermodernity. The author defines as a process of personalization the excessive focus on the individual that ends up not only restricting but also transforming the relationship with others. Lipovetsky argues that there is a softening of conflicts, in the sense that the superficiality of relations brought by personalization ensures the coexistence of opposing forces without any real encounter or debate. In addition to the immediacy that permeates social relations in the most diverse aspects, the author describes a neo-narcissism based on the encapsulation of the individual and on deep feelings of indifference. In contrast with the Marxist concept, he states that alienation in contemporary times comes not from the mechanization of labor but from a generalized feeling of apathy caused by a dizzying field of possibilities for individual choice.

Taylor (2011) recognizes in Lipovetsky (1983/2005) the precise description of the phenomenon of individualism, especially regarding the relationship between excessive self-centering and narrowing or flattening of life. Moreover, we can recognize, as the author himself points out, the closer proximity between his reflections and those of Lipovetsky (1983/2005) in the sense that both guard against an excessively negative view of the issue, pointing out such phenomena not only as loss and decline, but also in their positive character, effectively forming ways of life, which acquire in both authors a paradoxical configuration. The way of life that Taylor (2011) identifies as "individualism" finds in Lipovetsky (2004/2011) an origin that also goes back to the withdrawal of identity horizons:

> Hypermodern culture is characterized by the weakening of the regulatory power of collective institutions and the corresponding autonomization of social actors in the face of group impositions, be they from family, religion, political party or class culture. Thus, the individual is increasingly open and changing, fluid and socially independent. (Translated from the Portuguese version: Lipovetsky, 2004/2011, p. 83)

However, Lipovetsky's (2004/2011) approach to describing such a process lies precisely in this simultaneous dichotomization and intensification[4], which results in a polarization of values and in a different relationship with time. The presentism of relationships and modes of social coexistence ends up structuring ways of life and value systems whose most striking feature is their ephemerality. In terms of identity constitution, the superficiality and fluidity of meanings and subjective stances reigns. In affective terms, we observe a growing and widespread feeling of insecurity,

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3 In this article, the cited excerpts were retrieved from the following edition: Taylor, C. (1992). *Sources of the Self: the making of modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univesity Press. (Original work published in 1989

4 We found the same assessment in Resnick (1998).

uncertainty and anxiety about the future, as well as a specific type of depression linked to a lack of meaning or to boredom. As in our reference to neurosis as typical psychopathology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, depression becomes the typical contemporary psychopathology, even though the interpretation of its causes varies. Ehrenberg (2000), for example, argues that it is the typical manifestation of the exhaustion or insufficiency of the self in face of countless demands of performance.

These authors, thus, strongly emphasize, regarding individualism and the narcissistic or hedonistic ways of life that comes from it, a conception that the contemporary or hypermodern self is above all a self focused on the present. We can easily observe this characteristic in the production logic of late capitalism, which values the immediacy of results and always aims at the fulfillment of growing and accelerating goals.

> One of the most noticeable consequences of the power of the presentist regime is the pervasive pressure it puts on the lives of organizations and people. . . . Always more demands for short-term results, for doing more in the shortest possible time, for acting without delay: the race of competition prioritizes the urgent at the expense of the important, the immediate action at the expense of reflection, the accessory at the expense of the essential. (Translated from the Portuguese version: Lipovetsky, 2004/2011, p. 77)

Now, as Taylor (2011) points out, the tendency of the human sciences is to underestimate the role of certain more "abstract" components of the ways of life in a given sociocultural context, in favor of more "concrete" explanations. Thus, a certain transformation in the modes of production would totally explain the phenomenon in question, and the presentist ideology would be no more than its effect. However, immediacy and presentism are rather general characteristics of contemporary subjectivation processes than mere effects of transformations in the economic environment. An analysis that values only the so-called "concrete" factors fails to take into account the other side of the issue, which will also be of interest to Lipovetsky (2004/2011) when he explains the dichotomous character of hypermodern phenomena: "The effects produced by the new order of time far exceed the universe of work; they are materialized in the relationship with daily life, with the self and with others. . . . The faster you go, the less time you have" (Translated from the Portuguese version: Lipovetsky, 2004/2011, p. 78).

In this sense, the subjection to accelerated time is simultaneously an expression of an experience of scarcity of time, both being parallel threats to individuals' freedom and their power to organize life[5]. Moreover, paradoxically,

productivity and enjoyment of the moment are presented synchronously.

> On the one hand, a compressed, "efficient," abstract time; on the other, a time of focusing on the qualitative, on body voluptuousness, on the sensualization of the instant. This is how ultra-modern society presents itself as a disunited and paradoxical culture. A mating of opposites that only intensifies two important principles, both constitutive of technical and democratic modernity: the achievement of efficiency and the ideal of earthly happiness. (Translated from the Portuguese version: Lipovetsky, 2004/2011, p. 81)[6]

Several analyses identify the phenomenon of exacerbated consumerism or "hyperconsumption" as emblematic of the individualistic pursuit of an admittedly momentary pleasure. Lipovetsky (2004/2011) opposes to this analysis the hyperconsumption's characteristic of promising to renew the temporal experience. More than satisfying an admittedly momentary loss, consumption emerges as an ever renewed attempt to re-intensify daily life: "Perhaps it is there that resides the fundamental desire of the hypermodern consumer: to renew his experience of time, to revive it through the novelties offered as simulacra of adventure" (Translated from the Portuguese version: Lipovetsky, 2004/2011, pp. 79-80).

However, while Lipovetsky (2004/2011) focuses on consumer relations in what he calls fashion-function and how they shape an ambiguous and paradoxical relationship of the hypermodern self with time itself, Taylor (2011) highlights the character of concealment or inarticulacy that the identity issue acquires in the context of what he will call "soft relativism." That is, for the Canadian philosopher, it is a question of retracing the experience of loss of meaning to the very inarticulacy of the contemporary self regarding his own moral horizons of action, whose counterpart is valuing free choice as a producer of meaning in itself.

Taylor (2011) finds an intimate relationship between the ambiguous aspects of contemporary individualism, tracing a common origin for both the freedom of authentic choice of ways of life and the narcissistic or selfish modes that would lead to the condition we generally identify as malaise. At this point, it is worth highlighting two caveats of the philosopher about his reflections, which are also illustrative of the way contemporary thinking entangles us and complicates a meaningful discussion about such issues.

First, it is a matter of recognizing that this understanding of the relationship between freedom and individualism is not about a cost-benefit analysis or an assessment of the positive and negative aspects of contemporary changes (Taylor, 2011). The tendency

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5 Also a remarkable phenomenon that has attracted the attention of many researchers. See in particular Rosa (2010, 2012) and Aubert (2003).

6 See also, in this sense, but more critically, Gaulejac & Hanique (2015).

for making such an assessment may precisely illustrate a propensity for the indiscriminate use of instrumental reason to address the issues of a variety of fields, which are not always well suited to this kind of approach. The author believes that this is exactly the case, pointing to the fact that the discussion is moral and therefore dialogical, not an understanding of pre-existing or quantifiable meanings. Simply put, the author points out that a cost-benefit analysis involves a relationship between subject and object, while a moral discussion necessarily implies a relationship between subjects, a dialogue about the great goals of life[7].

Secondly, the author underscores the difficulties in articulating such a discussion in this context. Limiting moral themes to the intimate sphere represents the first difficulty. If we assume that each individual should seek to define his own values and determine what is good for herself or himself, any "external" stance on the subject can be quickly dismissed, simply by arguing that it would not be anybody else's concern. Here, Taylor (2011) mentions the reflections of Bloom (1987), who address this issue by arguing that behind the apparent openness and flexibility that this stance provides is, in fact, a *closing* corresponding to the inability to think critically about important and central everyday issues, under the influence of relativism. That is, it is a matter of recognizing that the very configuration of contemporary thought complicates any effort to address certain aspects of its functioning.

Identity as orientation

We consider relevant at this point to review the author's reflections on this theme in *Sources of the Self*. Taylor (1989/2013) begins to analyze in depth the general conditions of modern identity construction by identifying what he calls moral sources. If, on the one hand, such an investigation clearly is beyond the scope of this study, on the other, the author's reflections on the concept of identity and its relation to the "good" is very relevant and is the basis for understanding what Taylor has in mind when referring to moral horizon.

The author's argument is that the concept of identity is inseparable from the concept of *good* and, therefore, necessarily involves a moral reflection. According to Taylor (1989/2013), there are three general axes of what can ultimately be regarded as "moral thinking." These are (1) the sense of respect for and obligation to others (in the sense of "doing good"); (2) the ways of understanding what constitutes a full life (in the sense of identifying what constitutes a "good" life); and, finally, (3) the meanings related to dignity (concerning the motivational character that underpins moral assertions – distinguishing here an "attitudinal" respect as opposed to the respect for "rights" of the first axis). We are particularly interested here in the second axis, which concerns the use of morally positioned

language, which Taylor calls "strong evaluations," to think about the meaning of life itself.

Let us first turn to the notion of identity in general, and then explain how the issue acquires specific contours in the contemporary period. According to Taylor (1989/2013), it is necessary to recognize that the answer to the question "who am I?" is not exhausted by the enunciation of a name or even by a family tree, but that responding this concerns the morality[8].

> What does answer this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My Identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable or taking a stand. (Taylor, 1989/2013, pp. 43-44)

Taylor (1989/2013) thus proposes a definition of identity as orientation in a moral space. He thereby lays important groundwork for his understanding of contemporary identity and even of what he later defines as malaise. Using what he calls the principle of best description, he argues that when dealing with human phenomena one should not give up a description that offers precise understanding of a given experience in favor of any previously adopted ontological assumptions. It is an effort that the author calls a kind of "moral phenomenology" (Taylor, 1989/2013, p. 96). By recognizing the need to reserve a place for qualitative distinctions about values in language (what he calls elsewhere "strong evaluation"), Taylor (1989/2013) presents moral issues as indispensable to a precise description of lived human experience. The question of identity as orientation to the good may perhaps be the point where this argument of moral phenomenology is most explicitly present.

The whole condition of the *self* thus reveals itself, by such description, not as a set of positive statements about a particular individuality, but first and originally as a search. The notion of identity as orientation presupposes this search, and to be a *self* is thus to be in this constant search for a way of living well. Such characteristic of being a project, according to the author, is a requirement for being a self. It is not, therefore, a choice or option, but rather something that reveals itself in the examination of the limits of what is conceivable in human life, an unavoidable condition of the experience of possessing an identity.

However, defining identity as orientation goes beyond this characteristic of being a search or a project. Speaking of orientation or stance necessarily evokes a space where it can take place. There is no orientation or stance in the middle of nowhere or in an absolute void. As we have seen, Taylor (1989/2013) explicitly uses the

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7   See Bouveresse (1998).

8   For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Montefiore (1998).

image of spatial orientation to exemplify such points and emphasizes that such a search always takes place in a space or moral horizon, which is what the author defines as *framework*.

> I want to defend the strong thesis that doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type, some superman of disengaged objectification. Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood. (Taylor, 1989/2013, p. 43)[9]

As we have mentioned above, Taylor (1989/2013) states that, in modernity, the identity issue acquires its own contours, specifically in relation to the meaning of this search, which arises in the midst of an explicit and deeper questioning compared with other historical periods. The contemporary individual is the one who not only explicitly seeks meaning (and this is related to the ways in which such a search takes place individually and expressively), but also ultimately and by the radicalization of this movement elaborates the search itself as a meaning to be articulated and always put in check, since modernity broke with the assumption of moral values as something objective or already present in the natural order of the world (Taylor, 1989/2013, p. 65).

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9   In this sense, Oliveira (2006) brings Taylor's reading of Humboldt, Saussure's conception of language and speech, and Wittgenstein's conception of language games to the field of culture. That is, just as there is no private language (private meanings), since all meaningful speech presupposes the possibility of recognizing its meaning, including by the one who speaks, there is no private conception of good either, because every conception of good presupposes a moral field in which it is recognized, that is, socially recognized, as in the case of language. In this sense, as Taylor (1995/2000) points out, the conception of the good is not reducible to the individual himself, it is irreducibly social. This does not mean that there is no mutability, just as speech operations can alter language over time, but always respecting the rules of the field in which they occur, changing them from inside, then, through their erosion or lateral deviations, but never placing themselves outside the field in which they take place. In brief, change always occurs by relying in part on the set of rules that give it consistency or recognition, which is true for both language and culture. From this perspective, we do not agree with Oliveira (2006) in what she considers as an argument for the conception of a fixed cultural good in Taylor's theory, which would risk resulting in fundamentalism. If it were so, Taylor (1989/2013) would not have undertaken the genealogy of the formation of the modern Western self, which deals precisely with this path towards moral horizons, with their changes and permanences.

The moral field

The late development of this process inaugurated by modernity and representing our contemporary character, however, forgets or underestimates, as we have so far tried to show, that the value of individuality itself is a cultural process, elaborated, therefore, by the collectivity. It is precisely this dynamic between identity as an orientation to the good and the moral horizon in which it is inserted, that the question of contemporary malaise acquires its definitive contours. The preoccupation with one's own identity thus acquire, from Taylor's point of view, the character of an unavoidable search necessarily linked to certain configurations of a culturally determined field of qualitative distinctions. It is, therefore, a twofold character: it not only concerns the individual taking a stand on moral matters, but also necessarily refers to communal definitions. In the first part of *Sources of the Self,* in articulating the notion of identity and its relation to the "good," Taylor (1989/2013) already addresses the theme that occupies the central argument of his subsequent investigation in *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Namely, in contemporary times, since the advent of the ways of life that we identify here as individualists, the question of identity acquires its two-fold character. If, on the one hand, the individual stance is valued as never before, on the other, the configurations arising from the community, which necessarily underpins this movement, are truly obstructed.

Taylor (2011) refers to "soft relativism" or "moral relativism" to explain this characteristic, which is related to the difficulty of expression or articulation that exists in modernity in terms of discussing shared meanings. Individual opinion becomes an island of conviction that a debate would only violate and, from then on, isolation occurs at varying levels of explicitness.

This is how the paradox of the contemporary individual arises. On the one hand, the emphasis on the first character pointed out by Taylor (1989/2013), which is taken to the extremes of the individualistic way of life. Taylor is not the only one who identifies this extreme individualism. As we have seen, it is also present in the analyses of Lasch (1983), when he refers to narcissism, but perhaps it is even more consonant with our analysis in Lipovetsky (2004/2011), which uses the concept of "hyper-choice" to portray the superlative valorization of the individual taking a stand in modernity. On the other hand, the corresponding term of this individual positioning relationship is obscured by the imperative needs of self-centering and self-determination. The collective configurations seem to be only a backdrop to the authentic movement of the individual, which is this movement of taking a stand without external reference or this orientation that finds its coordinates within itself, to use Taylor's images (1989/2013). When we understand identity as a moral issue, this would be the definition of the ideal of authenticity according to the distortions of individualism.

Taylor (2011) points out that moral relativism obscures the fact that there are moral ideals at play, that individualism operates as an ideal, and thus it is not really conducive to a

scenario in which different ways of life are equally valued. Not only are people free to choose, but to some extent they are compelled to choose and to seek self-fulfillment as values and purposes in their own right, just as certain aspects of community life had value and purpose in themselves in earlier historical periods. This constitutes the central characteristic of individualistic social configurations, which, therefore, continue to be present and to have part in the orientation and stance hold by the individuals who live in it, even if not explicitly represented or, in Taylor's exact term (1989/2013), in an *inarticulate* manner.

Taylor thus believes that any possibility of overcoming this situation should be based on understanding that such moral ideals directly influence the forms of self-configuration, both personally and institutionally. Therefore, it is a matter of "taking seriously" the moral ideal of modernity and understanding, from an internal perspective, how it configures an individualistic, narcissistic, selfish life and, at the same time, represents a real possibility of fully experiencing authenticity.

Self-fulfillment and malaise

Taylor (2011) does this by reflecting on the assumptions of the ideal of authenticity. Each human being, in order to live a full life, must seek his or her self-fulfillment (which varies from person to person – the idea of originality) autonomously (i.e., based on the individual's own effort). By understanding that people's core values gravitate toward the pursuit of self-fulfillment, which ultimately must be a personal creation independent of "external" social norms or pressures, we can glimpse a way of being that radically opposes an internal pole (the *self* as the only possible source of authenticity for my own life) and an external one (the *social* as a pure exteriority to the self, a source of a variety of norms and pressures that often hinder the authentic choices of the self).

The problem, noted not only by Taylor (2011) but by several of his interlocutors, is that achieving this kind of individual self-fulfillment arouses negative feelings, linked to a certain generalized indifference (of the self to others, of others to the self and even of the self to the self's own achievements). At the risk of not living a full life, not realizing their own potential or wasting their own time, contemporary individuals are often led to retreat from the world, from the "external," because it is only by achieving clarity regarding their inner power of choice that they can prevent an "existential failure," which is the great threat of modernity. It is a threat very different from that experienced prior to the process of disenchantment of the world (Taylor, 1989/2013).

In other words, while in earlier historical periods the restrictive moral horizons imposed certain imperatives – which people obeyed for fear of damnation, and which itself was part of a transcendent web of meanings –the failure the contemporary individual fears is to see herself or himself amid an absolute void of meanings. Every choice, every construction of identity, therefore, occurs first in a search for a way of life full of meaning, even if not explicitly. Taylor (1989/2013) calls "hypergoods" those goods that stand out in a field of meanings and thus acquire an organizing role for an entire web of goods. They can be found in family life (which is proper to the modern individual, in what the author calls the valuation of ordinary life), professional success, artistic expression or religious experience, to name a few.

However, one must keep in mind that such meanings, although lived with authenticity, are always experienced as precarious, or at least more so than in previous periods. While valuing the ordinary life, as opposed to higher values as before, this ordinary life tends to acquire a contour of meaninglessness and inauthenticity as each individual's choice of self-fulfillment is seen as limiting. That is, what seems to matter and ultimately to occupy the central place of organizing good is free and constant choices, which tends to undo or cast doubt on one's own previous choices. This becomes the great obligation of contemporary man; hence we may speak of valuing choice or of choice as an end in itself. Moreover, as it is an overvaluation of the "internal" to the detriment of the "external," the act of choosing thus breaks with everything that may come from the exterior, including the values chosen by the individual, from whom is now demanded certain commitments for realizing these values.

It is precisely this silent pressure for choosing, for rupture, coupled with the loss of the sense of belonging we were talking about earlier that has as its harmful effect a widespread feeling of emptiness that leads to boredom or apathy towards ordinary life. The process is cyclical: the absence of a sense of belonging and an experience of personal relationships permeated by indifference and superficiality causes the individual to turn to herself or himself for meaning. However, even when life choices are made and affirmed, they are quickly dismissed by what Taylor (2011) calls the trivialization of choice. Herein lies the great paradox of individualism: while valuing a subjective turn and independent choices as sources of meaning for one's life, such meaning is not part of people's actual experience because it is always wrapped in an atmosphere of banality.

We can ascribe part of the feeling of apathy and malaise to a strictly subjectivist understanding of the attribution of values, within a scenario of mutual indifference to the values of others – a counterpart of the excessive self-centeredness, but also the effect of moral relativism itself, to which indifference to the ideals of others is a requirement, practically a matter of mutual respect.

In other words, overcoming this real trap which contemporary man faces requires recognizing at what point the ideal of authenticity ceases to become a real possibility of a full life to become this experience of a silent empty promise. Taylor (2011) believes that it is a matter of recognizing that excessive self-centering promotes a

false belief, an abstraction, that it is possible to constitute and experience one's own meaning independently of a community experience, which individuals often seek to avoid. Taylor (2011) summarizes this reflection on authenticity as follows:

> Briefly, we can say that authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ij) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed. But what must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other, of (A), say, at the expense of (B), or vice versa. (Taylor, 1991/2011, p. 73)

That is, the author identifies that self-centering comes from *privileging* certain dimensions of the issue, a forgetting of certain aspects of what would constitute a real experience of authenticity in favor of an exclusive focus on the particular, which understands itself as primarily opposed to the collective.

This is what is at stake when we mentioned that the moral debate is an inarticulate debate: as a clash between consciences, without a common term, such an effort can only result in the empty realization of difference. If the notion of identity involves an orientation to the good, the problem of inarticulation acquires definitive contours while necessarily evoking a community level of valuation and creation of meaning. As we have seen, Taylor (2011) underscores the importance of dialogue in the constitution of a full identity:

> Moreover, this is not just a fact about genesis, which can be ignored later on. It's not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then can go on to use them for our own purposes on our own. This describes our situation to some extent in our culture. We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (Taylor, 1991/2011, p. 433)

Thus, the feeling of emptiness regarding one's own choices is not just about the indifference with which they are received in a social context. When Taylor (2011) argues for the need to be open to a horizon of meanings, what is at stake is that the very constitution of an authentic project of life depends on such horizons to be realized. This is one of the aspects obscured by the simple valuation of choice. Any life choice is based on something that precedes it; it is a transformation of a meaning of life that is not created in reflective solitude, but in a dialogical experience of a common world. We can recognize here a certain kind of ontological dimension of the community.

Individualistic thinking, by valuing pure choice and excessive individual focus, devalues the social component necessary to any project of life. Instrumentally lived, the ordinary life of the individual emerges as a means to a greater end that escapes and determines it. Moreover, it could not be otherwise, precisely because a project of life is thus seen, by definition, as a retreat from the world. We have seen that this way of thinking and acting is a serious distortion, which entails perverse effects that are part of the contemporary malaise. We sought to show how Taylor (2011) points to the possibility of overcoming this situation, which necessarily involves rethinking the concept of authenticity in its social implications, highlighting what is promising in this ideal, in the sense of recovering the meanings lost in the individualistic fragmentation.

A questão identitária na pós-modernidade: autenticidade e individualismo em Charles Taylor

Resumo: Os fenômenos do esfacelamento das relações comunitárias e do isolamento crescente dos indivíduos uns em relação aos outros surgem de maneira expressiva no pensamento de diversos autores que se voltaram à descrição dos modos de vida da sociedade contemporânea. Retomamos a problematização do tema efetuada por Charles Taylor em *As fontes do Self* e em *A ética da autenticidade*. O autor identifica três "mal-estares" presentes na sociedade atual: o individualismo, o primado da razão instrumental e a alienação do indivíduo em relação à esfera política. Evitando uma leitura restritamente negativista de tais fenômenos, Taylor os apresenta como transformações das configurações dinâmicas que constituem os processos identitários modernos. Empreendemos um resgate das noções de identidade e autenticidade presentes nas obras supracitadas, visando uma compreensão sintética de tal cenário e das possibilidades apresentadas pelo autor de sua superação, ou seja, do resgate de sentidos perdidos pela fragmentação individualista.

Palavras-chave: autenticidade, identidade, individualismo, pós-modernidade.

La question de l'identité dans la postmodernité: l'authenticité et l'individualisme chez Charles Taylor

Résumé : Les phénomènes d'échec des relations communautaires et de l'isolement croissant des individus les uns envers aux autres apparaissent expressément dans les travaux de divers auteurs qui ont cherché à décrire les modes de vie de la société contemporaine. Nous reprenons cette discussion présentée par Charles Taylor dans *Les sources du Moi* et dans *Le malaise de la modernité*. L'auteur identifie trois « malaises » présents dans la société moderne : l'individualisme, le primauté de la raison instrumentale et l'aliénation ede l'individu par rapport à la sphère politique. En évitant une lecture restrictive et négativiste de tels phénomènes, Taylor les présente comme des transformations des cadres dynamiques qui constituent les processus identitaires modernes. Nous entreprenons une étude des notions d'identité et d'authenticité présentes dans les œuvres mentionnés, afin de créer une compréhension synthétique d'un tel scénario, ainsi que des possibilités pour surmonter le problème, c'est-à-dire de récupérer les significations perdues par la fragmentation individualiste.

Mots-clés : authenticité, identité, individualisme, postmodernité.

La cuestión de la identidad en la posmodernidad: autenticidad e individualismo en Charles Taylor

Resumen: Los fenómenos del fracaso de las relaciones comunitarias y el aislamiento creciente de los individuos unos con otros surgen de manera expresiva en el pensamiento de diversos autores que trataron de describir los modos de vida de la sociedad contemporánea. Retomamos la problematización del tema efectuada por Charles Taylor en *Fuentes del Yo* y en *La ética de la autenticidad*. El autor identifica tres "malestares" presentes en la sociedad actual: el individualismo, el primado de la razón instrumental y la alienación del individuo en relación a la esfera política. Evitando una lectura restrictamente negativa de tales fenómenos, Taylor los presenta como transformaciones de las configuraciones dinámicas que constituyen los procesos identitarios modernos. Emprendemos un rescate de las nociones de identidad y autenticidad presentes en las citadas obras con el objetivo de hacer una comprensión sintética de tal escenario, así como de las posibilidades presentadas por el autor de su superación, es decir, del rescate de sentidos perdidos por la fragmentación individualista.

Palabras clave: autenticidad, identidad, individualismo, posmodernidad.

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