

## **SØLVMEDALJE NM filosofi 2018/19 Emily Nerland, Oslo katedralskole**

**«One is a self only among other selves.»**

**Charles Taylor: Sources of the Self. Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 35.**

### On fellowship and the self

*The quote by Charles Taylor is a statement which, in his opinion, concludes a discussion human beings have had since we raised our sight from the rake and addressed it at ourselves. What does it mean to be someone, what makes me a self, an individual? Reading all different accounts on this question might not make you more enlightened, and the fact that philosophers still discuss it today is a proof that it is an advanced philosophical topic and highly relevant for us to recognize that there is some meaning with our lives. The arguments vary; amongst the contributors in the debate we have for example religious theorists, who claim that one is a self because and in power of a superior force, God, who decides our destiny and our worth. We also have radical sceptics who argue that because the objects we perceive and the thoughts we think are constructions of our senses and our mind, the whole universe must be as well. Our self is therefore no more than something we have constructed and cannot be something real.*

*However, Taylor's view is not one of a radical sceptic, although we can see inspiration from it and I will come back to this later. Taylor claims we are what he calls "a self" among other "selves", which then by definition can be compared to our own "self". We don't know what Taylor implies with "a self" in this context, but in my opinion we can look at it in two different ways. Firstly, to be a self can refer to being someone who conceives himself as a meaningful human being. This loose definition is extracted from the perception we have as individuals that when we are deprived of our will to live, we lose our integrated and inspired self. We might feel shallow and depressed and believe that we are no self, no personality, no will. The second manner to understand "being a self" is to look at it as what it means to have a body, the possibility to perceive the world and to be a human being in this universe. This second understanding of "a self" is probably the definition which has been discussed most widely and in a more complicated way. Nevertheless, I believe the first definition is also relevant in this context and I will therefore begin by addressing this particular way of understanding the self.*

*Our society is built on the foundation of collaboration. Anything else would be absurd, as we are an increasing number of people on a limited area of space. The system we live our lives by, capitalism, is dependant on other people and would collapse if one of the links in the*

*buyer-producer-seller-relation disappeared for good. From the day we are born, we are being included on this system, as our first life insurance is being signed by our parents. From there we go on to kindergarten, school, university and after that we work so that other babies get the same opportunities as we did. This cycle rolls like an eternal ball and no one really stops to question why and for what purpose – because those who do are called out as crazy. There is clearly no other way to organise a great amount of curious and innovative beings, as we need a foundation to add our new inventions on. In this way we experience a feeling of conservatism and innovativeness and as many people as possible are content. We are also dependant on a community in our society, as human beings are relational beings, and we thrive mentally and physically from contact with beings which are like us. There is a reason solitary confinement is one of the worst punishments and that many prisoners held under these kinds of conditions go insane.*

*Consequently, Taylor's statement does not seem so controversial. On the other hand, there are people who escape from society because they believe it drains human beings of individuality, creativity and peace of mind. The question is if this is a quality of society or if this is a quality of human beings in this society and therefore inevitable if we don't revolt against it. If the first case is true, we should go back to a way of living where as little contact as possible is preferred. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that this won't help. For all our primary needs to be filled, the most primitive solution is for us to go back to a hunter and harvest-community. But because human beings, as other organisms, seek the easiest and quickest solution with most positive outcome, there is no reason to believe we won't seek progress and advance and end up in the same position as we are now. If, however, the second case is true, that we need to revolt against this kind of society, one solution would be to live in a community such as an eastern monk community. Ironically, monks devote their life to a philosophy which applies that the whole universe is one entity and that all organisms and actions are united in a dimension which is impossible for us to intuitively understand. This is relevant because most likely, for all human beings to abandon this society and live in a community based on much solidarity, we will need an all-embracing philosophy which includes this way of life as the best possible solution. This opportunity has been there for several thousand years but has not emerged as an alternative to constant progress, and therefore it is more likely that humans will choose the safety and assurance in other people.*

*Following the idea that human beings inevitably will come together in a society where we are dependant and where we serve other beings, one can argue that there is no meaning in being a self without the presence of other beings. However, as stated earlier, there is another way to attack the concept of "a self". This involves the question of what it really means to walk this earth, to perceive and to sense and hence what "a self" is compared to what is not "a self". I believe this question, in some form, crosses most people's mind during their lifetime, but is stifled by the trivialities of everyday life as described above. Still, there*

are many great thinkers who have approached this question. Examples are a dualistic view which expresses the idea that the self is constructed by a body and a soul while a more physicalist view would press that a human being is only neurons in a brain, and consequently there is no soul. The dualistic definition does not necessarily include Taylor's opinion, but does in no way exclude it. Dualistic philosophers have discussed what happens when a body disintegrates and many have concluded that, because a soul is not visible for our body's eyes, there must be some other dimension where souls are visible or possible to detect, and this is defined as a higher dimension such as Heaven or an Idea world. Following this line of thought, there must be a hypothetical condition where all but one soul is in one dimension and all the others are in another dimension; will, by Taylor's statement, this lonely soul be defined as a self or will it suddenly become something else. Though it must be considered that this dimension most likely operates beyond our linguistic conceptions and our rational knowledge, the thought could still be applied. This argument inevitable leads us to the question if God is a self, and, if he is not, what idea he then can be described as.

What happens if we apply Taylor's statement to a physicalist's way of thought? A counterargument this philosophy often faces is the question of how and when a complexity of atoms can produce such a thing as a self. This paradox can be compared to the paradox of a pile of sand; if you have one grain of sand and add another grain of sand and then another grain of sand, at what moment does it become a pile? Is it maybe the presence of other complexities of atoms which makes us a self? This does not make much sense considering the fact that there are lots of rocks, horses, dandelions and houses, but that does not mean each individual within these categories are defined as a self. Accordingly, the self needs to be a self before it interacts with others of the same kind. But, by Taylor's statement, that is contradictory because the self cannot be a self before other selves are present.

How can this be possible? Earlier I mentioned radical scepticism and their conclusion that there is no way to prove one person's world looks, feels or operates in the same way another's world does. We know that people's minds work differently, because we associate the same word with different things and we easily misunderstand each other. However, to believe no other being function as you do, that they are all constructions of your own mind and therefore not real, is very radical. On the other hand, does it matter? At this moment, you believe that you cannot change how other people act, so why should you care if they are anatomical or not? And if they are constructions of your own mind, then you might be able to control them after your will, but would you know how? In relation to Taylor's statement, we see the same problem arise; if other human beings are not the same rational and anatomic being as you, you are not surrounded by the same type of beings, so can you then be called a self when you are not among other selves? As opposed to the other cases we have looked at, the answer to the question in this case is probably yes. If the world is a construct of your own mind, then your definition of the self is the only right definition. While Taylor's stated "self"

*can be defined as other things, it is up to you what definition you apply. Consequently, you can define a self as a human body and in this way live happily as a self among other selves.*

*We have seen that Taylor's statement apparently contradicts itself when it is used as part of a definition of what "a self" is. It is a possibility if we disclaim everything we know about the world, but this will ironically result in a lonely philosophy of life. On the other hand, we have seen that the statement makes much sense when applied to society in multiplicity. Thus, it might not be any relevance in defining the "self". Many thinkers confine to solitude because they seek the definition of what it means to be a human being, a self. Is it a possibility that they were all meditating in the wrong company? We have seen that humans advance when they cooperate as a society, so what reason is there to believe that we work and innovate most progressively as a team, but we don't think most progressively as team? As Descartes' philosophy concerns, existence follows the capability to think. If one who thinks progressively, also will exist progressively, we will most likely thrive in the perception of being a self as we are existing in the most superior sense as a team.*

*Our society is built on the foundation of collaboration. We live with a safety net of our society, and most people will argue that you do not need any more than that in this primitive world. Is there a need to understand anything else than our role in this community? We thrive as a team. But does this only mean that you study to become an engineer and subsequently construct a road which others in our society can find useful? Or is your part in a society also to make others feel that they are somebody, not nobody? Is your part in a society to also make others thrive, to help one see himself or herself as "a self"? I believe the thought of coexistence gets lost in the comparison and the competence we endure on a daily basis, but we should not forget that when other people call you "a self" they most likely mean something completely different than you, and that the only way for you to be reflected is in others, regardless if they are autonomous or not.*