

Taylor Chapter 4

Inescapable Horizons

The Purpose of This Chapter

Taylor begins the chapter by reminding us of his central question, “Can any one say anything in reason to people who are immersed in the contemporary culture of authenticity” (31)?

If authenticity is understood in terms of subjectivism or self determining freedom, what makes the self (and determines its significance) are the choices the self makes.

If this is the basis of the self and thus of authenticity (as the knockers claim), authenticity is impervious to reason, because the only measure of truth, significance etc. is the individual - “you have your opinion, I have mine.” There is no basis for reasonable conversation.

Taylor clearly rejects this position, and this chapter is an extended argument about how the self and authenticity must be understood outside of a subjectivist framework to avoid the consequences claimed by the knockers.

The Argument

1. Authenticity means “each of us has an original way of being human ...I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s ... If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me” (Taylor 28-9).
2. Thus each of us must find what makes us significant.

The Argument

3. One way of viewing authenticity is that “all options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth” or significance (Taylor 37-8).

In this view, the self and authenticity are dependent solely on the choices made by the individual.

This represents the subjectivist position which Taylor rejects

The Argument

4. But, if choice is the measure of significance, then all things are (at least potentially) equally significant (think about Taylor's examples of 3732 hairs or wiggling one's toes in mud from p. 36).
5. Significance is defined as something of special importance - something that stands out.
6. But if choice alone determines significance, nothing stands out and what is significant is not significant - a logical contradiction. This contradiction renders Herder's definition of authenticity (#2 above) a meaningless statement and thus destroys the entire basis for authenticity. This is what Taylor means when he says "Soft relativism self destructs" (37).

The Argument

7. “Unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. Self choice as an ideal makes sense only because some issues are more important than others” (Taylor 39)

The Argument

8. Significance is only rescued (and with it the very basis for authenticity) by recognizing the dialogical nature of our identity - that our identities are shaped and sustained by interactions with others.

“No one acquires the languages needed for self definition on their own. We are introduced to them through others who matter to us, what George Herbert Mead calls ‘significant others.’ The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not ‘monological,’ not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical” (33).

The Argument

9. It is this dialogical nature of our existence that provides us with “horizons of significance.” Horizons of significance are the backdrop of significance beyond ourselves within the context of which we can find our own personal significance and hence authenticity.

“I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. . . . Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial” (Taylor 40-1).

Such horizons of significance rescue the idea of significance from meaninglessness and and thus authenticity from its debased forms.

The Argument

10. Therefore: Authenticity as a moral ideal requires the acknowledgement that people and things outside of our selves shape what is significant and meaningful for us.
11. Therefore: It is possible to reason with someone from within the culture of authenticity (Because subjectivism is not, nor can it be the basis for authenticity).