

Taylor Chapter 8

Subtler Languages

I. Modern culture is dominated by “subjectivation”

- Subjectivation is the tendency of things to center on the subject

“Things that were once settled by some external reality - traditional law, say, or nature - are now referred to our choice” (Taylor 81).

- Subjectivation can be understood in two ways:

Subjectivation of manner - The unique way in which the individual approaches or is oriented toward the world. This is an essential component of authenticity as Herder and Taylor have defined it

Subjectivation of matter - An insistence that the content of one’s actions must be self referential and all issues of significance settled at the level of personal choice. This variety of subjectivation leads to debasement.

- While authenticity requires an inwardly chosen (self referential) manner of living, this does not require that the matter one chooses as the focus of one’s life must be internal, or self referential.

“I can find fulfillment in God, or a political cause, or tending the Earth. Indeed, the argument above (in previous chapters) suggests that we will find genuine fulfillment only in something like this, which has significance independent of us or our desires” (Taylor 82)

2. Subjectivation and debasement

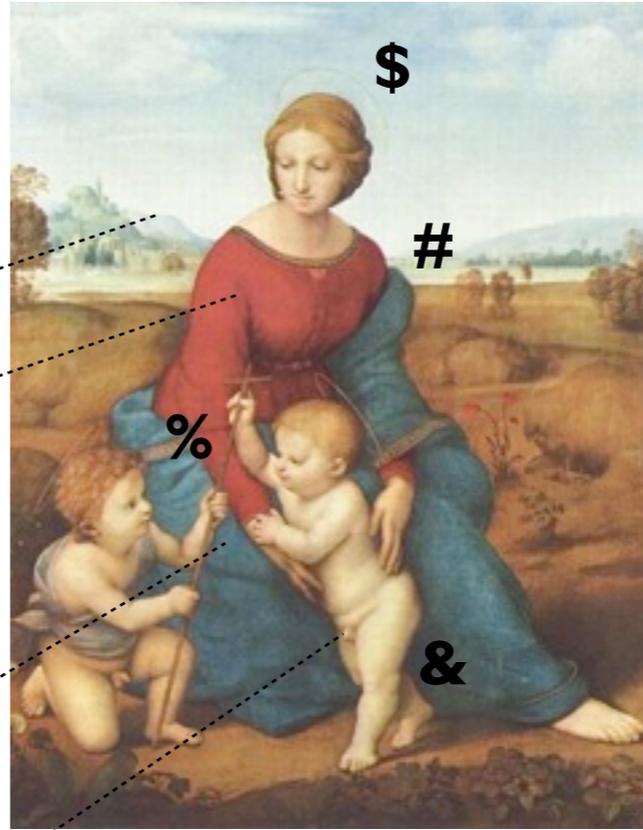
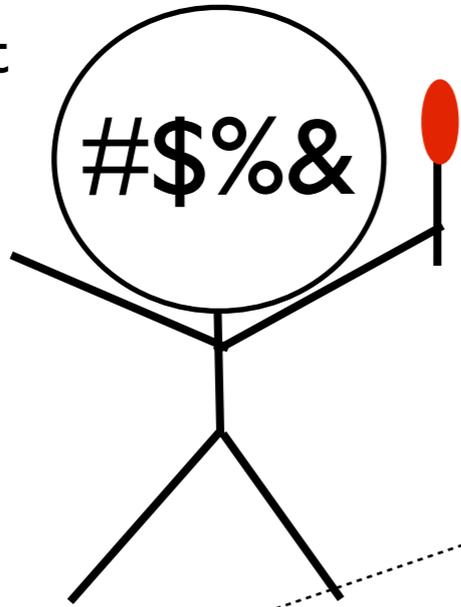
To confuse these two modes is catastrophic and results in the debased form of authenticity. Taylor's point here echoes similar themes and warnings found throughout the book:

- The confusion of self determining freedom and authenticity first discussed on pp. 27-8
- The problem with equating choice with significance discussed on pp. 37-8
- The problem of acknowledging the role played by creativity while denying the importance of horizons of significance to the concept of authenticity pp. 66-7

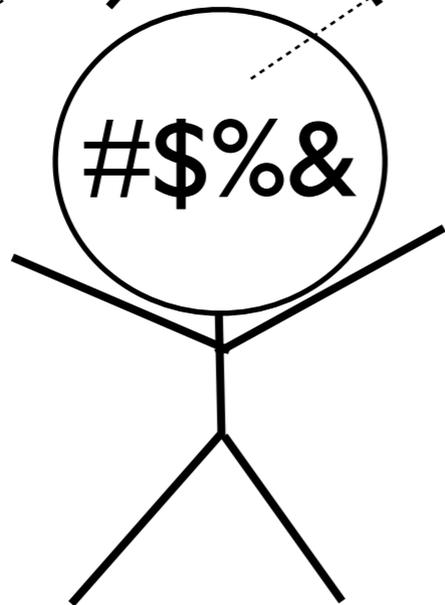
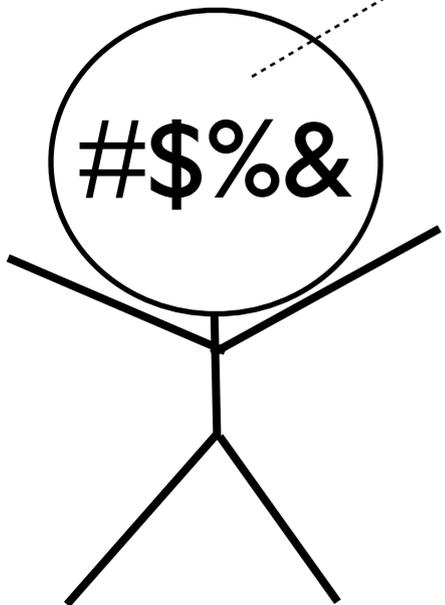
3. To illustrate this distinction (and how easily the two modes can be confused) Taylor returns to the example of art. Remember, Taylor sees the artist as a metaphor for the authentic self.

- Taylor argues that in the premodern period the “matter” of art was shaped by “the publicly available reference points that, say, poets and painters could draw on” (Taylor 83).
- What Taylor means was that there was a generally known and accepted body of language, knowledge and symbols that artists could use to convey meaning:
- “Until the end of the 18th century there was sufficient intellectual homogeneity for men to share certain assumptions . . . In varying degrees . . . man accepted . . . the Christian interpretation of history, the sacramentalism of nature, the Great Chain of Being, the analogy of the various planes of creation, the conception of man as a microcosm . . . These were cosmic syntaxes in the public domain; and the poet could think of his art as ‘imitative’ of ‘nature’ since these patterns were what he meant by nature” (Wasserman quoted in Taylor 84-5).

Artist

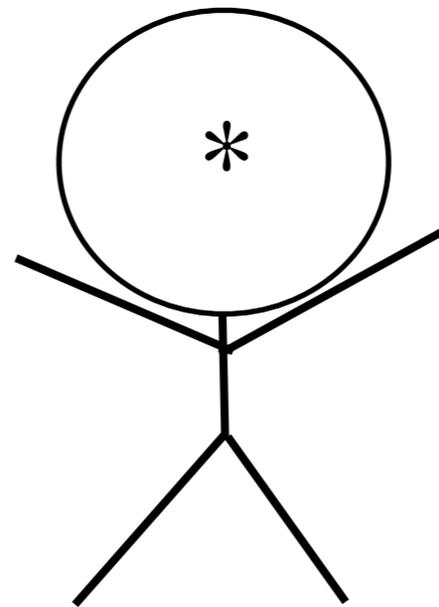
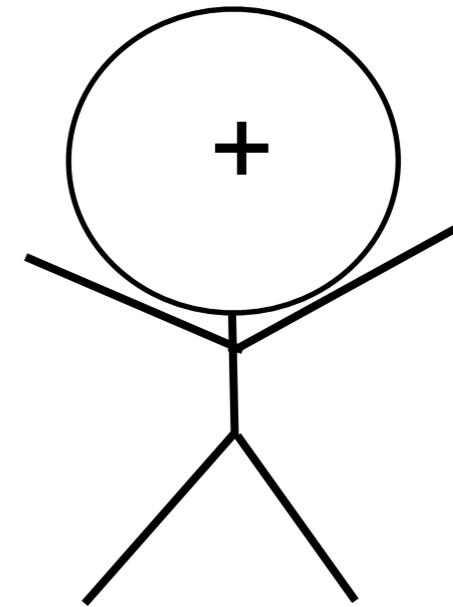
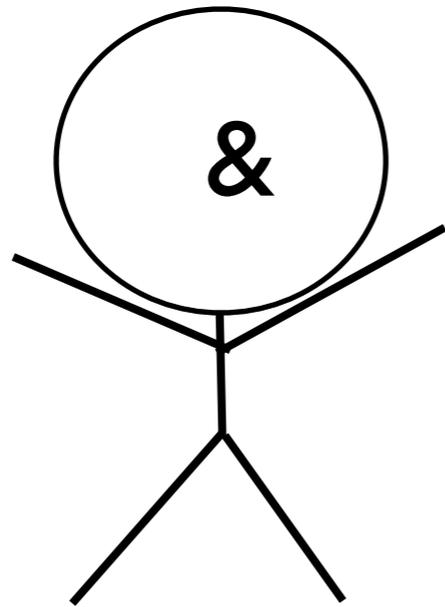
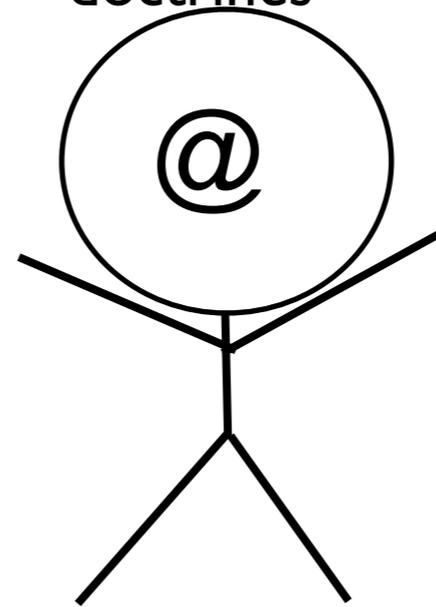
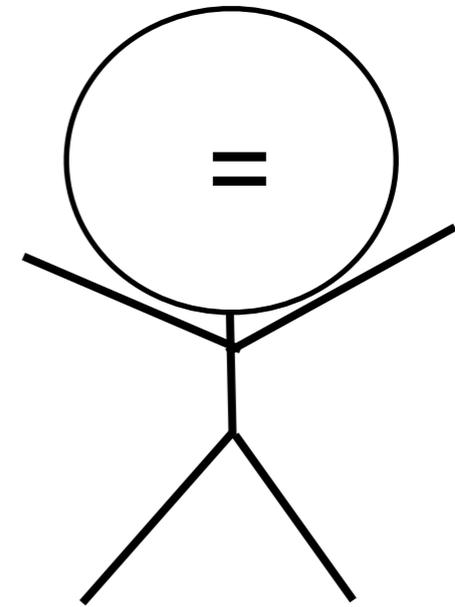
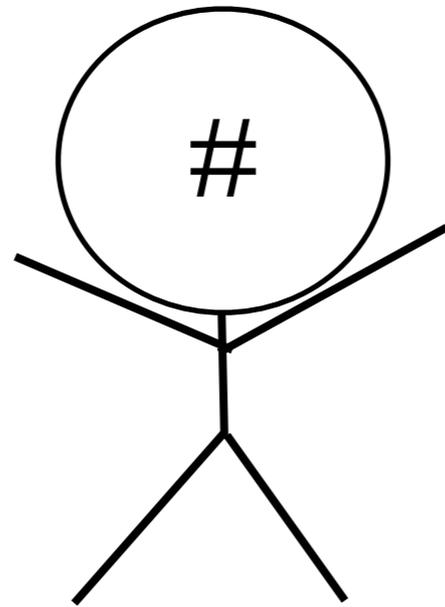
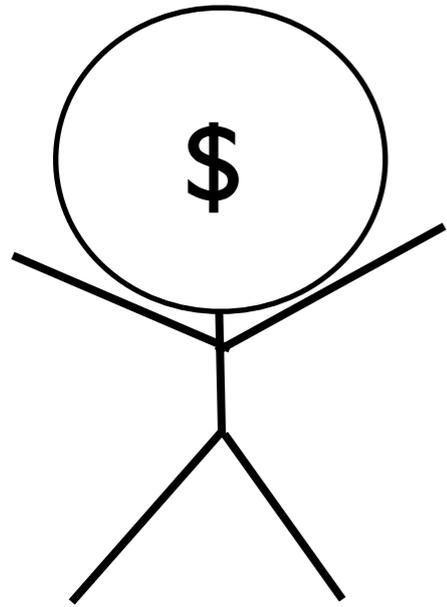


What does it mean?
Obviously,
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- With the coming of the modern period the old points of reference are no longer common to all - No agreed upon body of language, symbols and knowledge exists.

But with the coming
of modernity,
individuality, and
equal recognition,
“we can’t draw on
simple acceptance of
formerly public
doctrines



- This change means that the artist's role has changed. No longer is the artist simply imitating (mimesis) reality or transmitting universally accepted symbols and motifs - now the artist must engage in acts of formulation/ creativity (poesis)

“By the 19th century these world pictures had passed from consciousness . . . Now an additional formulative act was required of the poet” (Wasserman in Taylor 85).

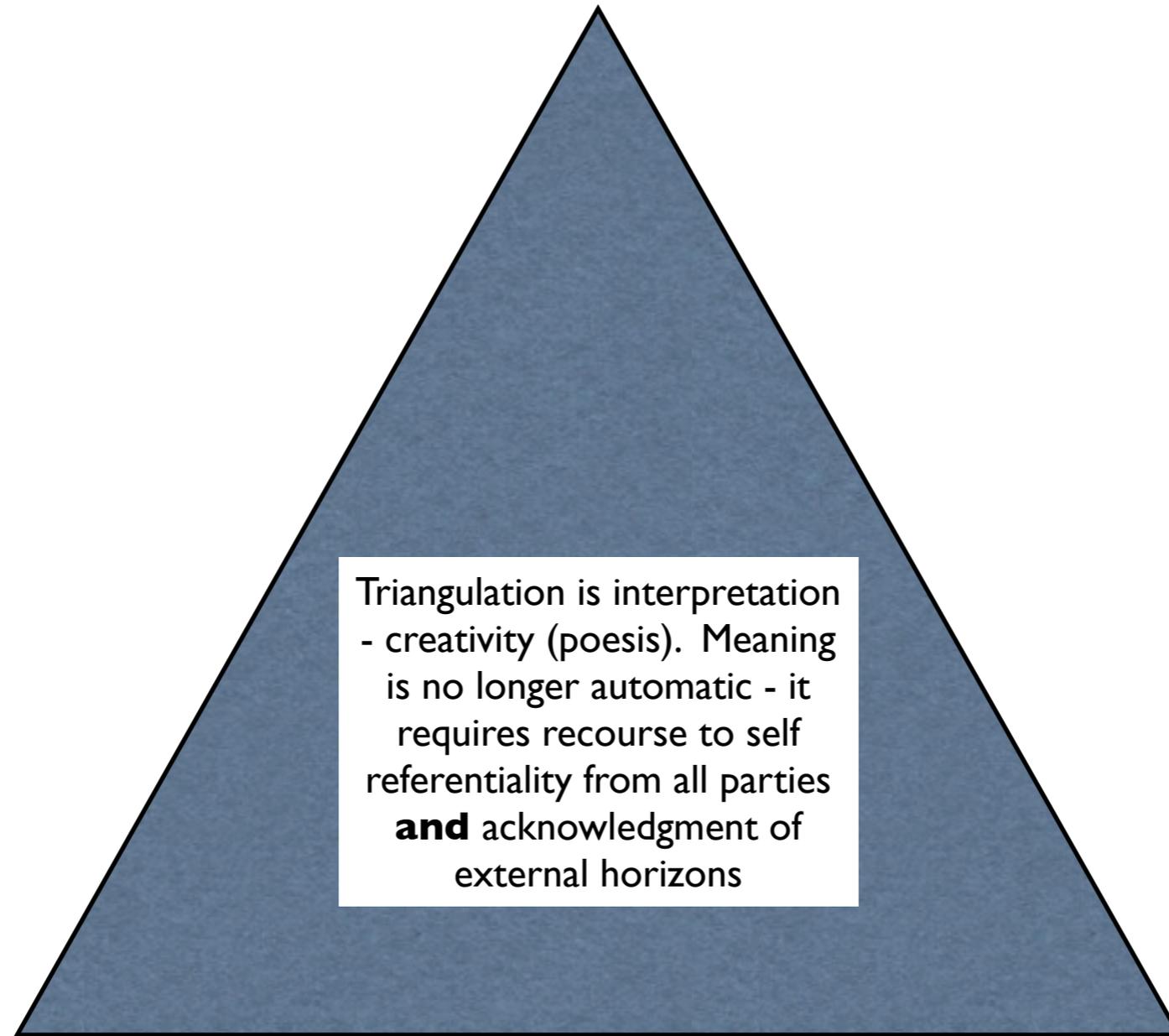
“The Romantic poets and their successors have to articulate an original vision of the cosmos” (Taylor 85).

- Just as art now required an original vision of the world, so individuals in modern society must articulate an original vision of themselves (Herder in Taylor 28-29)

4. A subtler language

- This new vision is articulated in what Taylor calls a “subtler language” - one that draws upon things external to the artist (matter) but expresses the artist’s sensibilities (manner) regarding these external things.
- To understand art in the modern era, the viewer’s “sensibilities must resonate” with the artist’s (Taylor 87) - given that no common language now exists. Taylor calls this triangulation (Taylor 83). While previous forms of expression could be directly understood, modern art required interpretation (itself an act of creativity) which required the viewer’s sensibilities to resonate with those of the artist and the artist’s own manipulation of external sources.

The world outside the self



Triangulation is interpretation
- creativity (poesis). Meaning
is no longer automatic - it
requires recourse to self
referentiality from all parties
and acknowledgment of
external horizons

The artist's
own
sensibilities
and feelings

The viewer's
sensibilities
and feelings

4. A subtler language

- Taylor argues that the greatest modern artists (for example Rilke, Friedrich, Elliot, Proust and Wordsworth) always have an agenda (matter) that is beyond the self, While their articulation (manner) of this agenda may be personal and draw on inner meanings. Thus the world still makes claims on these artists and their work. Taylor contrasts this with “a great deal of modern art [that simply] ...turns on the celebration of human powers and feelings” (Taylor 89), such as Italian futurism of the early 20th century, which sought:

”To sweep from the field of art all motifs and subjects that have already been exploited ...To destroy the cult of the past ...To despise utterly every form of imitation ...And extol every form of originality ..To render and glorify the life of today, unceasingly and violently transformed by victorious science” (Futurist Umberto Boccioni quoted in Gardner’s Art Through the Ages 822).

- Taylor suggests that this is the artistic equivalent of self determining freedom (and debased authenticity) where creativity/poesis is the only value in art (think all A and no B from chapter 6)

4. Conclusion

- Thus a subjectivism of matter as well as manner, strips us of our ability to confront issues beyond ourselves, and just as Taylor would argue that this reduces art to the mere exercise of personal power and authenticity to narcissism, so to does it strip us of our abilities as a society to effectively confront the great and crucial issues of our day.

“For some of the important issues of our time, concerning love and our place in the natural order, need to be explored in such languages of personal resonance. To take a salient example, just because we no longer believe in the doctrines of the Great Chain of Being, we don’t need to see ourselves as set in a universe that we consider simply as a source of raw materials for our projects. We may still need to see ourselves as part of a larger order that can make claims on us. Indeed the latter may be thought of a urgent. It would greatly help stave off ecological disaster if we could recover a sense of the demand that our natural surroundings and wilderness make on us” (Taylor 89).

“If authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own ‘sentiment del’existence,’ then perhaps we could only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole. It is perhaps not an accident that in the Romantic period the self-feeling and the feeling of belonging to nature were linked” (Taylor 91).