

The Good Sense of the Modern: Revisiting Heidegger's Social Ontology

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Abstract

By the term social ontology I mean to argue Heidegger's definition of the social existence of the self. In this paper I will look at Dasein as an engaged modern self, located in its context and history within the specifics of self's embeddedness. The good sense of the modern is the manifold ways in which dignified human flourishing can be imagined, which, as Charles Taylor points out, is the mainstay of modernity as a condition of being human. Dignified human flourishing upon the planet, amidst all its beings, and without obstructing the open space that humanity nurtures for the circulation of manifold meanings of realities, should mean that technological modernity in its emerging total shape cannot sustain the good sense of the modern. Technologically supported human flourishing, concretized through the international market system of overproduction and overconsumption, is a definitive denial of the good sense of the modern. The paper will attempt to retrace some of the ethical, spiritual and innate human qualities whereby we can reimagine and re-enchant modern identity amidst an overwhelming Technological Modernity. Modernity is not to be rejected but its good, wholesome and meaningful sense is to be interpretively appropriated. I will elucidate the notion of the modern self from an engaged perspective, which is embedded in a social and cultural context and which is bound to manifest justice.

Keywords: Heidegger, Taylor, Engaged Agent, Modernity, Technology

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Introduction: The Ontology of the Engaged agent

In the history of Western philosophy, there are two broad pictures of the human knowing agent: (i) the agent who is able to disengage herself from her context and situation, capable of abstracting pure, universal and objective knowledge, as if she was not a part at all of her world of engagement; and (ii) the agent who is radically engaged with her context, situation and her world as the hermeneutical subject of the whole knowledge production activity. The dispassionate ideal of knowledge and the knower is privileged in the modern age and has led to the privileging also of the dispassionate knowledge of the natural sciences. Whereas, according to the ideal of the knower as the engaged agent, the primordial basis of all knowledge is the world of engagement of the knower, and so, the disengaged knower and the knowledge thus produced, say, scientific knowledge, is a derivative form of engaged knowing.

The notion of selfhood is a running theme in the huge philosophical opus of Charles Taylor. In his magnum opus, *Sources of the Self*, Taylor gives an exhaustive and teleologically interpretive history of the modern self. He, in fact, is in search of an account of the intellectual history of modern identity, precisely the modern westerner's sense of selfhood. By 'identity' Taylor means the ensemble of the understanding of what it is to be a 'human agent', a 'person', a 'self'. He aims to show how the ideals and interdicts of this identity shape our philosophical thought, our epistemology and our philosophy of language, largely without our awareness, and how these intellectual-cultural outputs, in turn, affect our sense of selfhood. Heidegger depicts the knowing self in terms of engagedness, situatedness and embodiment in direct opposition to Descartes' disengaged knower. The agent who accesses her world is not a doubting, thinking, logical self; rather, she is, in Taylor's words, 'shaped' by her *form of life*, history and bodily existence. For example, that the subject is embodied means that her manner of accessing the world is very unique to an agent with the human kind of body. The embodied human agent can get hold of things nearby immediately, but to get things from farther away, she has to move that far. Certain things she can grasp effortlessly, whereas certain other things she can do so only with a struggle. "To say that this world is essentially that of this agent", notes Taylor, "is to say that the terms in which we describe this experience... make sense only against the background of this kind of embodiment" (Taylor, 2006). Similarly, her experience is also shaped by her context, history, culture and language. There is an already set hermeneutical context that makes our first access to entities as that particular entity possible. At least our primordial way of accessing the world is not background-free and presuppositionless, and the objectification of the object of knowledge (the scientific kind of knowing), while it is very significant, it is to be understood as secondary and derivative of the primordial accessing of the world.

It is for this reason that Heidegger calls our firsthand access of the world as 'understanding' ("understanding of existence as such is always an understanding of the world" (Heidegger, 1973)) and conceives understanding as always already interpretive. This means that when we understand an aspect of our world we understand it already *as* something, *as* some part of *our* world. We are able to do this because the world acts as the background for our understanding. Heidegger writes: "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling" (Heidegger, 1973). And so, the conclusion for Heidegger

is: “An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (Heidegger, 1973). Being the way I am—an embodied, cultural, historical, finite, worldly being—the first access I have of the world is conditioned by the entanglements that constitute my Being (that is, embodiment, culturality, historicity, finiteness, worldliness). Disengaging from these entanglements is a secondary exercise and thus derivative of the first. For Heidegger, privileging of the secondary exercise, as we notice in Descartes and the whole of modern culture inspired by him, is inauthentic and needs rectification. The later Heidegger would argue that the privileging of the disengaged model of accessing reality, what he calls *Gestell* or Enframing (technological understanding), an aftereffect of the Cartesian model of knowledge, has the danger of denying the human being’s entry “into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (Heidegger, 1977). In short, modern knowing, entrapped in a technological vision, has the problem of tunnel vision—it denies the possibilities of other modes of knowing, indeed even the more primordial mode of knowing the world in its palpable liveliness and meaningfulness. Thus for Heidegger it is our active engagement in our everyday world that confers our identity as persons.

Taylor draws on both Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein in formulating his attack on the disengaged view. Both of them are, in Taylor’s view, pioneers in thinking engaged selfhood and agency. For Heidegger, we know the world on the basis of an already given finite background; for Wittgenstein, meaning cannot be intelligible without an already given form of life. Both these giants of twentieth century Western philosophy, Taylor adds, propound a theory of ‘the context of intelligibility of knowledge, thought, and meaning.’ Taylor sees both these monumental philosophical achievements as having a counter-cultural significance of puncturing the hold the disengaged view has on modern thought and culture through “the hegemony of institutions and practices that require and entrench a disengaged stance: science, technology, rationalized forms of production, bureaucratic administration, a civilization committed to growth, and the like” (Taylor, 1995a).

Hence, Heidegger deliberately avoids the use of terms like subject and spirit as representative of the human being. He notes that terms like subject, soul, consciousness, spirit, person and ego, which in themselves are thoroughly loaded with metaphysical meanings, are used in philosophy without clarifying these meanings appropriately. “So we are not being terminologically arbitrary,” he writes, “when we avoid these terms—or such expressions as ‘life’ and ‘man’—in designating those entities which we are ourselves” (Taylor, 1995a). On the other hand, he chose the term *Dasein* (Being-there) with the definitive import of the embeddedness and embodiment of the human being. By the use of the term ‘*Dasein*’ Heidegger also wanted to depict the human being as a non-substantial unfolding from the moment of its birth towards its definitive closure at death. This means also to clarify the meaning of that nebulous word ‘Being’ in a radical fashion. The central argument of *Being and Time* is that an “understanding of Being... itself belongs to the constitution of the entity called *Dasein*” (Taylor, 1995a).

The human comportment towards the world or agency, Heidegger attests, does not arise from the fact that we are mental substances first and foremost or spirits but because first and foremost we find ourselves existentially engrossed in a world without any subject-object distinction. The view of ourselves as detached minds is a

secondary interpretation we undertake in terms of our relation to objects, giving rise to what is generally called the 'theoretical attitude'. We act in and know our world first and foremost as engaged agents and secondarily as disengaged onlookers. Being as such is accessed by us as engaged agents. Heidegger was bothered by the modern subject's total project of privileging the theoretical view as the only view of Being and of Nothing. That is, the way in which an entity or the totality of entities manifest in their neutrality, calculability and manipulability for the subject is the only legitimate way in which entities can manifest themselves; their other modes and ways of manifesting to the modern subject are not legitimized and hence they become nothing from the modern subject's point of view. The later Heidegger's critique of technological understanding follows this route which began in his early concern with engaged agency.

One of Taylor's central thesis, which can be allied with his Heideggerian ontology, is the dialogical nature of human action. Human life cannot be comprehended merely in terms of individual subjects and their actions. Agency and selfhood can be made intelligible only in terms of shared existence, which constitutes the self. Shared existence is not an addition to the self, but is its very constitution. Heidegger's notion of *mitsein* (Being-with) is comparable here. Our understanding of the self, society and world is a product of our dialogical act. We cannot have it otherwise. Taylor says "that language itself serves to set up spaces of common action, on a number of levels, intimate and public. This means that our identity is never simply defined in terms of our individual properties. It also places us in some social space. We define ourselves partly in terms of what we come to accept as our appropriate place within dialogical actions" (Taylor, 1995b). By the dialogical character of our existence, Taylor means that we cannot become complete human agents, understand and describe our identity without acquiring the capacity for rich expression through a language. Language cannot be learned by oneself without interaction with another; language is learned in responsive communication with others who matter to us. We begin as babies with 'significant others' and gradually extend our circle of communicative expression. "The genesis of the human mind," Taylor writes, "is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical" (Taylor, 1994). Hence, dialogicality is not a good addition but a constitutive element of our existence. Relation with others does not merely fulfill ourselves but defines our identity. Moreover, it is not only that human mind and language take shape in dialogical terms; it is a continuous and stable constitutive part of our existence. Even when we are expected to define ourselves and our world by ourselves, as the modern liberal democratic tradition is wont to do, it cannot happen purely in that fashion. Selfhood or identity is constructed by us through the early phase of our life and is refined and reconstructed throughout our lives "in dialogue with, sometimes in struggles against, the things our significant others want to see in us." Even as we outgrow this circle of immediate and significant others like our parents, Taylor adds, "the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live" (Taylor, 1994). This is what is meant by the deep constitutive sociality of human existence, articulated in profoundly ontological terms by several philosophers of the twentieth century, like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Levinas, Buber, Gadamar, Ricoeur and Habermas, among others.

I have been referring to ‘background’ and ‘embodiment’ on and off in this discussion about engaged selfhood. Both Heidegger and Taylor, as hermeneutic critics of the disengaged perspective on the self, consider that a background or context “as the unexplicit horizon within which — or to vary the image, as the vantage point from out of which — this experience can be understood” (Taylor, 2006). My selfhood, as it is not an abstraction completely unrelated to my context but is concretely related to my context, also arises constitutively out of my background. At least partially, I am defined by my socio-cultural context. I am not doomed and enchained in a ‘type’ but even when I challenge and critique my society and culture I am still partially defined by it. Again, a background understanding is sensible only from the point of view of embodied existence. It would be impossible to understand our humdrum activities of grasping directions and following rules if we were not embodied and not placed within the implicit background from within which we make sense of our explicit significations. The disengaged view of ourselves and our world as representations and pictures locked up within our minds would be akin to playing a cricket match on a computer. Thus, the standpoint of engagement is closely related to the standpoint of embodiment. Taylor is completely preoccupied with the idea of the tacit background upon which what can be known, what is meaningful and what is intelligible shows up, and for such showing up embodiment is a *sine qua non*. For instance, he writes that embodied agent is the one “who acts to maintain equilibrium upright, who can deal with things close up immediately and has to move to get to things farther away, who can grasp certain kinds of things easily and others not, can remove certain obstacles and others not, can move to make a scene more perspicuous, and so on” (Taylor, 2006). Hence, “[t]o say that this world is essentially that of this agent”, notes Taylor, “is to say that the terms in which we describe this experience... make sense only against the background of this kind of embodiment” (Taylor, 2006). So, we have two aspects of Taylor’s hermeneutical thesis: that the agent is embedded or engaged within a background and she is embodied. The two theses are inextricably tied. Our embodiment already means that our experience is also shaped by our context, history, culture and language; these aspects of our embeddedness are meaningful only against a background of our embodiment.

The hermeneutical notion of the engaged self does not mean that our selfhood is what we self-consciously think, plan and visualize about ourselves, or that we are what we want to become. On the other hand, it means that before we plan and visualize something about ourselves, we *are* something, a self, in and through the continuous activity of pre-cognitive interpretation of ourselves. That our selfhood is hermeneutically structured means that our social and cultural context has already constituted our sense of self in an important way and we continue to view all that is not self from the point of view of the self. Both these aspects of our self-constitution (its background/ context and its self-understanding that determines all its other-understandings) has a puncturing effect on the disengaged-self thesis. A representation of ourselves as disengaged agents itself is constructed out of a particular —that is, modernist— self-understanding. This is what Heidegger means when he says that a circular interpretive structure is hidden in the very constitution of meaning and the existential structure of Dasein, which is ‘the understanding which interprets’. “An entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure” (Heidegger, 1973). The self can never be completely absent from what has meaning for it, be it what is seen or heard, what is theoretically reduced to view, or what is emotionally binding its attention.

The Social ontology

For Heidegger, the engaged self is Being-in-the-world; for Taylor the engaged-self-thesis also is a 'social thesis'. By this they mean that human existence or Dasein stands out into the social space of meaning that is already available for any human existence. This social space of intelligibility is the 'there' of Da-sein. Any human existence becomes a 'self', an engaged identity, only in terms of its dialogical appropriation of its 'there'. It is hence that human existence is 'Da-Sein' (Being-there). As we have seen, Heidegger dramatically characterizes the 'who' of the engaged self in its average everydayness as not the 'I myself' but 'the They' because individuality is a specific negotiation of the 'there' (the social space of intelligibility) of human existence. Even when through resolute appropriation of its possibilities Dasein becomes an authentic self, what it 'owns' is one/ some of the possibilities of its 'there' and thus authentic self itself is 'the they self', the engaged self, in its ownedness rather than in its existential evasion.

This is a profoundly 'social thesis' regarding individual human existence, and can be posited as a thoroughgoing counter-argument against the atomistic, disengaged imagination of the self of the liberal political tradition. Individuality and its meaning-making is inextricably entangled in the social space of significance, and the ontology of the social is not simply a summation of these individualities, but something that is always already there for individuality to emerge in the first place. Truly, individuation is itself a specific appropriation of the sense of community, and hence a sense of community, a standing-out-into-the-communal-space-of-meaning, is constitutive of being human.

Nevertheless, the sense of community is to be seen as the counter-position to liberal individualism. In fact, liberalism itself is based on the principle of community, namely 'fraternity'. The major reaction to liberal individualism, communism, is philosophically the most stringent expression of community —a classless society where every individual is fully free for self-expression. While historical communism turned out to be a colossal denial of freedom, the sense of community that it exposed is never irrelevant. In this paper, I can only leave this space of the sense of community an open space, indeed a sense of sociality and the significance of Being-with, which humanity has not learned yet to fully bring out into the openness of Being as the most beautiful expression of meaning. As Jean-Luc Nancy has pointed out, the moment this sense of community coagulates into a 'We', which is nothing but a 'collective I' as Heidegger points out, we seem to deny the very sense of community we want to negotiate. Hence, it seems to me that the sense of community should animate human agency, a powerful sense of being affected by human absence and presence, but not any concrete or coagulated community as such. That would run counter to the post-axial notions of benevolence and justice to all humans, and the posthuman notion of letting beings be. Restraining the sense of community, as Levinas says fittingly, is a profound, though necessary, betrayal because we are engaged, embedded, temporal and finite selves. However, our ethical gestures of at least not harming the other, when we are restrained by the sense of community not to venture out to positively support and uphold them, is to be seen as an ineradicable guilt marked once again with our inchoate sense of community. Whatever manners of authentic fostering of the other, even distant others, that we can still invent despite the

deep-rooted interruptions of power inherent to the 'there' of Dasein, these need to be shown to have emerged visibly from the sense of community as such.

The Good Sense of the Modern

I have argued in this paper that for reimagining and re-enchanting modern identity, the conception of engaged selfhood shows the way. Modernity is not to be rejected but its good, wholesome and meaningful sense is to be interpretively appropriated. For this the cultural imagination and philosophical clarification of engaged selfhood is the way forward. As the engaged self, the modern self is to be located in its context and history within the specifics of every self's embeddedness. There are manifold ways in which dignified human flourishing can be imagined, which, it must be remembered, as Charles Taylor points out, is the mainstay of modernity as a condition of being human. However, historical humanity's social imaginary or cultural space of meaning is manifold; there are several understandings of Being across human groups in the world. How dignified human flourishing, the mainstay of modernity, is appropriated and made sense of by historical peoples across the globe is the central issue of the good sense of the modern. It is something that animates the current interest of social scientists, philosophers and literary theorists all over the world. Should they all follow the technological-calculative trajectory of western modernity, even on the strength of their historical hindsight, or would western technological understanding of Being in its world dominating contemporary form allow anything but the blind appropriation itself is an engaging question. Partha Chatterjee's essay, "Our Modernity", argues that western modernity became acceptable to Indians during the later part of the colonial era, the era of nationalism, through the prism glass of India's own engaged understanding, though not always successfully. He seems to imply that this engaged understanding of modernity seems to have faded with globalization, the world dominating trajectory of the west's technological understanding of Being. He invokes Indian courage to reignite an engaged understanding of this new avatar of modernity. We must leave the plausibility of this suggestion to the strange movements of human history. But this study suggests that this possibility is a necessary ingredient of the good sense of the modern. Without it modernity is the decadent, meaningless reproduction of equivalence.

This paper suggests a definitive closure to the post-axial modernist demarcation of the sole and total flourishing of the human being as the only meaning of the modern from a posthuman perspective of the good sense of the modern. Dignified human flourishing upon the planet, amidst all its beings, and without obstructing the open space that humanity nurtures for the circulation of manifold meanings of realities, should mean that technological modernity in its emerging total shape cannot sustain the good sense of the modern. Technologically supported human flourishing, concretized through the international market system of overproduction and overconsumption, is a definitive denial of the good sense of the modern. Indeed the technological model of the regimentation of the good in fact disallows human flourishing for the majority of world's people and threatens the sustenance of human flourishing itself for generations unborn.

This study, despite its argument in favour of human guardianship over the interstitial interface or world wherein meaning circulates in all its manifoldness, and in the varieties of forms nurtured by historical peoples, it argues for the ways that support the significance of all beings, that restrain the technological leveling of all meanings,

and that sustain the equal dignity, non-equivalence and variously meaningful flourishing of all human beings within these many interfaces or worlds. Such an imagination, it is argued, is central to the good sense of the modern. This imagination is ontologically post-axial but more than stringently modern because the interstitial interface or world within which we meaningfully encounter ourselves, others and non-human beings is neither the magical sphere nor the interiority of the subject. This proposal is still modern in as much as the modern project of human flourishing was never morally set in motion for the destruction of meaningful human flourishing; it was never morally imagined for the destruction of the earth. The interstitial interface is Being-in-the-world, which is impossible without humanity and impossible with only humanity. As Heidegger says in "Letter on Humanism" in reference to Sartre's claim that existentialism is a philosophical imagination where there are only human beings, Being-in-the-world is not a space where only the human being is; it is a space where Being or intelligibility dwells in its manifoldness. This is the good sense of the engaged modern self proposed in this proposal.

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