

THE DISCOURSE ON THE SELF WITHIN ITS ENVIRONMENT

Topic 3

I. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of uncovering of our self has undoubtedly increased exponentially, especially with the increased appearance of slogans such as *be yourself* and *do what you want to, not what others tell you to* in the Western media environment. The world around us has begun to offer a myriad of possibilities and opportunities for self-discovery, enabling us to try out different hobbies, professions, and even people in order to judge what we truly are. The increased freedom to do so has put forward the phenomenon of interconnection of a human being with its environment, a kind of a symbiosis and reciprocation, where one influences the other and vice versa -- in order for us to be ourselves, we oftentimes transform our environment to various extents in order for it to suit our needs.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims that we are *in the world through our bodies*, and by becoming aware of our existence in the world (*insofar we perceive the world with our bodies*), we are enabled to understand our self. This is in line with the contemporary *Weltanschauung* of trying out many different activities in order to achieve insight into what we are -- as one recognizes that, as it is oftentimes said, *their life is in their hands*, essentially recognizing their existence within the world and its reciprocal interconnection, they try to lead their life according to what they believe they truly are. Merleau-Ponty's claim that through acknowledgement of one's existence in the world one uncovers their self will be examined through contemporary lens -- first, the ontological constitution of a self that allows the uncovering will be examined through Cartesian substance-duality and methodical doubt, contrasted with Nietzschean Doctrine of Types. Second, the question of whether our self is uncovered, or is it rather formed, will be answered through introducing Charles Taylor's concept of formation of distinctions of worth through language. Lastly, the contemporary phenomenon of why we are increasingly pursuing an authentic self will be explained by Sartre's account on authenticity and Heideggerian concept of angst, finally concluding that a self is a formed entity, and that we have increased means to enable this formation.

II. ONTOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION AND UNCOVERING OF THE SELF

The statement that *by re-establishing contact with the body and with the world in this way, we will also rediscover ourselves* establishes a crucial assumption -- for the self to be rediscovered, it must already pre-exist. What is therefore the ontological constitution of the self that enables such an assumption?

The most simple answer would be that our self may be metaphysical. An example would be the Cartesian self -- philosopher Rene Descartes, a substance dualist, proposed that the world consists of the substances *res cogitans* (thinking thing) and *res extensa* (extended thing), where the former are metaphysical ideas, formal in God and attainable through a mathematical method of thinking. *Res extensa*, on the other hand, is the material world around us, perceived through sense-perception. Our self consists of *res cogitans* and is thus

a metaphysical idea, innate in us and given to us by God. In fact, existence of a self is the first concept Descartes proves with the use of what Eva D. Bahovec refers to as methodical doubt, i.e. a method of doubting into every single concept and rebuilding knowledge concept-by-concept, accepting only concepts that do not present a disturbance in the chain of indubitable truths. Thus, the first link in the chain of concepts one cannot doubt into is the self, marked with a famous phrase *Cogito ergo sum -- I think therefore I am*. However, he establishes this on the premise that if one thinks, whatever they think, be it correct or incorrect, is a proof of the existence of their self. Methodical doubt thus allows such an existence, as well as the uncovering without an environment that enables us to do so, branding Descartes as a solipsist. However, the method seems not only impractical and time consuming, where one would have to self-isolate and break down all of the existing knowledge in order to discover what they truly are, it also seems quite impossible to even think of our self without referring to past interactions with the world. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of how we acted in a certain situation, asking ourselves 'are we a bad person?' if we acted selfishly, or thinking of ourselves as honest if we do not lie often. The Cartesian claim thus seems ill-fitting to the notion of existence-within-the-world.

Since Merleau-Ponty seems to reject a metaphysical part of a self to exist by stating that we are in the world with our bodies, and since the Cartesian position seems impossible, can a self therefore pre-exist without a metaphysical basis behind it? Nietzsche offers an answer with his *Doctrine of Types*, where each person is defined by how their *innate drives* are placed next to each other, e.g. how their desires relate to self-discipline etc. One thus fits a certain psycho-physical type that determines who they are based on the aforementioned placement, and in order to uncover the defining type, one must refer to morality as an indicator. This fits the Merleau-Ponty's claim well -- since morality regulates subject-subject and subject-other relations, it, in a sense, shows the subjects perspective on their environment, which is defined by the placement of the drives relative to one another. By acting according to our outlook on what is good and what is not, we uncover our self. The interconnection of ourselves with the world through our ethical system allows us, in terms of Merleau-Ponty, to rediscover ourselves. Acknowledging this interconnection, that morality is the defining indicator, allows us to even begin the process of examination of self. Therefore, for the Merleau-Ponty's claim to hold, the self must pre-exist, but not in metaphysical terms, and must allow itself to be uncovered through ethical praxis.

III. UNCOVERING OF THE SELF OR ITS LABILE FORMATION?

Up until now, the discourse on our self had been based on the assumption that the self pre-exists and is thus uncovered through experience, as Merleau-Ponty states that one rediscovers themselves. Does this assumption hold, or can the environment have a different effect on the self? Is the self really discovered, or is it, through the interactions in the world, actually formed?

The Nietzschean perspective, as explained in part II., calls for a pre-established ontological basis of the self, where one is determined by their psycho-physical type that reflects unto their moral actions. This notion, of course, diminishes the possibility for another notion to exist -- since one's actions are just a reflection of their type, they are pre-determined as well,

disabling the existence of a human being as a *causa sui* (self-caused) i.e. possessing the ability to create their own purpose in life, however they see fit. Our understanding of morality is therefore a fixed perspective, a notion Nietzsche uses to divide the human beings into higher men and others, where the latter has a different outlook on what is good and what is not, in a sense taking away the possibility that one recognizes their actions as intrinsically wrong. This seems contrary to an every-day experience -- each one of us has, at some point, changed their perspective on an action being wrong or right, be it adultery, lying in special circumstances or any action in a morally-ambiguous circumstances. Charles Taylor offers an answer to why we sometimes 'flip-flop' on the moral value of an action, as he connects the form of our moral principles and other values to language. According to Taylor, language is a transcendental condition for formation of *distinctions of worth*, i.e. whether we judge something to be good or bad. For language to exist, there must be a continuous dialogue between subjects, discussing and influencing each other's moral values, perspectives, opinions. We are, thus, only a self in a sea of other selves, perceiving the world through our bodies and establishing a contact with our body and with our world, speaking in Merleau-Ponty's terms, changing and forming our self, interaction after interaction. Taylor perceives the entering of this continuous dialogue as a crucial condition for the formation of a self to even take place, as we need to be able to understand the language around us in order to form *distinctions of worth* and apply them to situations. We are still, in a sense, discovering our selves, as we judge whether we have applied our perception on these distinctions correctly in a certain situation; we reflect on whether our action was 'right' or 'wrong' according to these distinctions, evaluating our self in their terms.

Taylor's perspective actually offers a false, illusory sense of control over such a formation, where oftentimes the contrary is the case. If our environment is a fundamental factor in our design, as Merleau-Ponty insists, does it not influence this formation in ways we do not want to see occurring? Are we fully aware of how our moral values are changing, or are we just labile marionettes that react to the dynamic of the environment in a random manner? According to Taylor, our self does depend on the language around us -- however, it is important to note that those who are involved and present in the dialogue play a role as well. If they were absent from the dialogue, we would not be able to be influenced by their understanding of distinctions of worth, making us unable to shape our self according to discussion with them. Not only that, we might not recognize the influence the environment has upon our self, where collective group-think is able to slowly make us accept some distinctions of worth we had opposed before. This phenomenon is unavoidable in times where the self is still undergoing formation, especially in so-called 'formative years'. However, our awareness that we might be subject to unwanted environmental influence on our self helps us stick to our own distinctions we had swore to abide by.

IV. ON THE INCREASED PURSUIT OF AUTHENTICITY

Since I established that the environment and the self are in a reciprocal relation -- my self influences other selves in a dialogue and vice versa -- why has, especially for the last century, the pursuit for a formation of an authentic self increased? Why is there such a drastic need to form our own self while being in contact with the environment, however trying to distance ourselves from it nevertheless? As mentioned before, especially the Western

entertainment and media has started to emphasize the importance of living according to one's self, encouraging the formation of one's self through *contact with the body and with the world*, i.e. encouraging experience of the world around us.

In order to answer these questions, the existentialist concept of authenticity must be explained. In Sartre's terms, our self in the environment consists of given facts about itself, referred to as *facticity*. We are unable to modify these givens, and they constitute our thing-in-itself (*en soi*), which holds true for all of the beings in the world. However, only human beings are able to *transcend* these givens by assigning them value and relevance for our self, in other words, we are able to determine the extent of our facticity on our definition of ourselves. We are thus not only a thing-in-itself, but also a thing-for-itself (*pour soi*), able to assign value to interact in the world on our own terms and thus being authentic, recognizing and acknowledging the constant tension between transcendence and facticity.

But we cannot always pursue an authentic life. In some cases, one must acquire means in order to do so, through inauthentic practices, such as working in a profession they do not appreciate. Heidegger states that in such occurrences, the Dasein (being-in-the-world, i.e. our self in the environment) experiences a feeling referred to as *angst*, or anxiety. This angst hovers over us, especially when feeling *ill-at-ease*, i.e. when we are not working towards something, essentially being bored due to not having an aim to accomplish. Angst is uncomfortable to a high extent due to it being a reminder of our finitude in this world, and that the only way to make our lives count is to live authentically. So, why did the phenomenon of an increased pursuit of an authentic life arise in present times? The answer is simple. Increased social and overall mobility, high number of opportunities and ways to live our life, such as different and more accessible professions, schooling, and especially an influx of more accessible information, has given way for avoidance of angst and for self-formation to be pursued. An increased freedom of choice how to form our self and increased options for different selves to be formed has in turn, exponentially enlarged the drive to do so.

V. CONCLUSION

In this essay, the claim of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that we are rediscovering ourselves through acknowledgement of the self-world relation has been examined through the consideration of the prevalent contemporary *Weltanschauung*, where one is encouraged to live an authentic life. The notion of Merleau-Ponty that our self is re-discovered is first proven to be unable to support a self that has a metaphysical ontological basis, as such a self would not require the contact of the body with the world in order to be uncovered. Cartesian self that consists of *res cogitans* is thus rejected through its comparison to Nietzschean psycho-physical determination of types. Secondly, the assumption that a self must be discovered is argued against on the basis that morality cannot be a fixed, predetermined phenomenon, arguing for Taylor's formation of a self through dialogue, where distinctions of worth are constantly re-evaluated. Then, the phenomenon of the contemporary increased endeavour of formation of an authentic self is discussed through explanation of authenticity on Sartre's account and Heideggerian concept of angst. Finally, it is concluded that our self is actually a formed entity through dialogue without a metaphysical basis, influenced by its

contact with the world, contrary to Merleau-Ponty's claim that the influence of the environment causes us to discover ourselves.