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The Role of Feelings in the Cognition of Values in the Perspective of Hermeneutic Philosophy (Gianni Vattimo and Charles Taylor)

Abstract: The article discusses the role of feelings in the process of the cognition of values in the perspective of hermeneutic philosophy, and – more specifically – in the light of the works by two major representatives of this current: Gianni Vattimo and Charles Taylor. Despite many differences, both philosophers share the interest in the role of feelings in the process of self-interpretation and in the importance of individual moral choices. In hermeneutic philosophy, more significance is usually attributed to reason than to feelings, which makes the investigation of the role that feelings play in the process of the cognition of values and their importance in the space of interpersonal relations particularly interesting. The context of the present considerations is that of the crisis of institutional forms of social trust and therewith associated ethical principles. The author of the article analyzes the possibility of creating an ethics based on values, yet an ethics critical of institutional forms of behavior and the formalized rules of conduct developed for the purposes of the organizations.

Keywords: hermeneutic philosophy, feelings, values, communication, Gianni Vattimo, Charles Taylor

> *Hermeneutics – as interpretative activity and as a philosophical theory – must guard against treating these personal aspect of the experience of the true as provisional and accidental moments to be overtaken in the direction of the transparency […].*[1]

In the second half of the 19th century and throughout the 20th, hermeneutic studies gained proper recognition in the field of humanities – first as a unique "method" of text analysis, and later as a tool applicable in interpretation of other narratives: visual, cinematic, or those discursivizing events and interpersonal relations.

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1. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 35.

The impact of the hermeneutic approach caused an important turn in the humanist research in philosophy: the shift of philosophical focus from theoretical analyses to problems of practical nature[2]. The next shift occurred *within* hermeneutic philosophy itself, where the reflection on the general foundations of understanding became secondary to the reflection upon understanding derived from human experience and subjective identity. It was discovered that in order to get to know *the human*, one cannot ignore the idiosyncratic experiences of *an individual*. The term *hermeneia* denotes "expressing thoughts on a specific topic." Yet, the semantic field of verb "to express" in the above definition encompasses such notions as "verbalizing," "explaining," "translating," and "communicating."[3] In the hermeneutic perspective, human experiences, including experiences of emotional nature, are culture-mediated.

The term "hermeneutic philosophy" denotes a certain mode of practicing philosophy, associated with such thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, and Charles Taylor. Today, some scholars grant hermeneutical philosophy the status of an independent discipline, characteristic for a clearly defined language and its own methodology. Others treat it as a means to develop a new communicative universe (the concept of a new *koiné*).[4] Myself, I lean towards the latter stance, and it is in this context that I analyze the concepts proposed by Vattimo and Taylor. Both philosophers represent the current of hermeneutical philosophy, both refer to the same readings, and, in their analyses, both emphasize axiological issues, recognizing the paramount importance of the role of intuition and feelings in the cognition of values.

Building correct communication relationships with others is a particular challenge in the context of the crisis of "grand" metaphysical narratives and related narratives of ethics. The nature of the exigence cannot be reduced to casual misunderstandings and conflicts that may be resolved by way of a dialog: it is a crisis of what allows us to establish "communities of meanings" for the concepts we use. Symptomatic of this crisis is the "state of incongruity," a situation, in which the allegedly "common" ethical concepts reveal their incompatibility in terms of philosophical content when they are employed in the debates focusing on ethics. The lack of a shared metaphysical narrative and the crisis of the modern practical

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2. See Andrzej Przyłębski, *Etyka w świetle hermeneutyki* [Ethics in the Light of Hermeneutics] (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010), 11–29.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutik," in: *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 3, ed. Joachim Ritter et al. (Basel–Stuttgart: Schwabe Verlag, 1974), 1061–1073.

4. See Włodzimierz Lorenc, *Filozofia hermeneutyczna. Inspiracje, klasycy, radykalizacje* [Hermeneutic Philosophy. Inspirations, Classics, Radicalization] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019), 15–16.

reason – the state of affairs that we have inherited – both result in the fact that we find solving moral problems markedly problematic. In effect, we entrust the resolution of moral dilemmas to lawyers and courts issuing verdicts.[5] The burning necessity of the present is to seek an ethics in which the recognition of arbitrary values can be reconciled with the diversity of forms of social life and with the variety of human attitudes and behaviors. And it is in the context of such a search that my critical reading of the ethical thought of Vattimo's and of Taylor's may prove useful.[6]

In this text, I wish to highlight a certain feelings-related trait of hermeneutic philosophy, which I would like to present in an axiological/ethical perspective. Interpreting feelings creates the foundations for interpersonal communications. It is worth noting that we do not have a way to fully understand our own feelings, let alone the feelings of others. Nonetheless, we seek to come as close to this understanding as possible, especially when moral decisions we make as subjects are at stake. Feelings must be separated from emotions. The former are rooted in the substrate of mentality, and, as such, are enhanced or weakened by environmental and cultural influences. Emotions, on the other hand, as physiological/behavioral phenomena, are biologically conditioned. As such, they are an aspect of human corporeality. However, due to our psychosomatic unity, it is difficult to draw a clear line between feelings and emotions.[7] The above notwithstanding, in this article, "feelings" is the term of preference. It is through feelings and their interpretations that we get to know the world of values.

Hermeneutics of Experience

Following the postulates of Friedrich Nietzsche, Vattimo would consistently reject philosophical metanarratives based on the concept of transcendence (God,

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5. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 447–448.

6. Among others, one should quote works written by Polish scholars, such as: *Hermeneutyka i literatura – ku nowej* koiné [Hermeneutics and Literature – Towards a New *Koiné*], ed. Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, Michał Januszkiewicz (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2006); *Charlesa Taylora wizja nowoczesności. Rekonstrukcje i interpretacje* [Charles Taylor's Vision of Modernity. Reconstructions and Interpretations], ed. Christopher Grabowski, Jan P. Hudzik, Jan Kłos (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Łośgraf, 2012); Andrzej Kobyliński, *O możliwości zbudowania etyki nihilistycznej. Propozycja Giannego Vattima* [About the Possibility of Building a Nihilistic Ethics. Gianni Vattimo's Proposition] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UKSW, 2014).

7. Bennett W. Helm, *Emotional Reason: Deliberation, Motivation, and the Nature of Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198–200, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511520044; Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 84–85.

historical reason, scientific reason). He argued that the significance of the "grand narratives" should be deflated, and that the metanarratives themselves should thereby be relocated to the realm of finite reason.[8] In so doing, he would refer to the concept of *pietas*, which he associated with the formula of narratives devoid of any metaphysical or theological background, addressing the existential situation of the subject making a moral choice. In such a light, *pietas* may be construed as a variant of Heidegger's *Andenken*: a particular type of memory in which accounts of such experiences are stored. Experiencing sympathy, we intuitively discover the narrative space of compassion.[9] Suspending the knowledge of the absolute and the infinite, we focus on what is finite, limited, impermanent, or "weak." According to Vattimo, in this narrow perspective, the value of respect for life does not lose its universal importance. Its essence lies is the compassion shown to others – humans or animals – whose suffering we witness. The Latin word *pietas* – of which the Greek equivalent is *eusebeia* (εὐσέβεια) – means *duty*, *piety* (in the sense of the cultivation of respect for gods and for people), or *love concordant with one's vocation*. The lexeme is semantically akin to the Italian *pietà/ pietà filiale*, meaning *mercy* or *pity*,[10] to which sense Vattimo, rooted in the Italophone culture, refers in his work.

The pre-discursive "lucidity" of *pietas* results from the fact that we cannot help but feel compassion when faced with someone's suffering. We act upon a metaphysical intuition founded on the feeling born in our shared experience of the contingency of human existence, which is the fundament of what could be dubbed "a community of feelings," a particular variety of the (Heideggerian) community of experience. *Pietas* denotes love towards what is alive; it grows out of our commitment to the affirmation of existence, and from our understanding of the traces of life now gone by. Addressing these phenomena, Vattimo refers to the German term *Verwindung* used by Heidegger in his later works, which denotes "coming to terms with a loss," "transgression," or "recognition of belonging." *Verwindung* may also signify "recovering from an illness," or "convalescence" that the subject undergoes having previously discarded the "grand narratives," replacing them with a simple feeling independent of the principle (*arche*). In the ethical sense, the feeling *precedes* the principle, which locates it in the space of *an-arche*.[11] This

8. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 120–121.

9. The emphasis on the national language is important because Vattimo himself relied upon the Italian definition of pietas. "The End of (Hi)story," *Chicago Review*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1987), 20–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/25305376.

10. Blandine Colot, "Pietas," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin et al. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 783–785.

11. Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 46.

aspect of rejecting principles in the name of the defense of the (Heideggerian) authenticity of moral sensitivity is particularly important at this point.

"Convalescence," in Vattimo's understanding, is the process in which one "recuperates" the original sources of sensitivity; it occurs when the subject opens up to the call of the *Ge-Stell*.[12] The process is energized by an inquiry, provocation, recognition of one's own distance from what is socially imposed. Such a "recovery" does not cast one in doubt or despair; conversely, it leads one to an unenforced commitment to, and voluntary acceptance of, the responsibility for others and for one's own actions. Then – "simple" feelings towards another person manifest themselves as standing in opposition to the formalized rules of reason and to institutionally defined procedures of conduct.

Yet, in order to open up to the source experience of the "non-systemic" values, an interpretive reminder (*Andanken*) is indispensable. This, however, begs the question: is it possible for us to refer to the original experience while somehow ignoring the context of cultural mediation? Vattimo seems to provide an affirmative answer. Such a "return to the sources" is possible, yet only on condition that the subject experiences a shock, an existential jolt. Such an experience occurs in situations in which one meets a suffering person and confronts the latter's idiosyncratic helplessness ("nakedness"), which calls one to deliver care and embrace responsibility. In such situations we cannot help but feel *pietas*; it has its source in the obviousness of the empathic experiencing of similar tribulations. This type of the assertion of the "axiological obviousness" is a variant of the search for an unwavering metaphysical basis for ethics. It happens, as it were, against Vattimo's exhortations to reject all metaphysics. In this case, the scholar's argumentation is similar to Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the meeting: it is in the "nakedness" of the defenseless "face" of a fellow human that Levinas seeks the original meaning of the responsibility for another.[13] Vattimo, however, emphasizes the role of moral feelings in the cognition of the other more explicitly than does Levinas, as, in his view, finding ways to build a relationship with another requires reference to stories rooted in the subject's past, ones with which the subject identifies. Still, although the crisis of metaphysics is the crisis of the "grand narratives" of ethics, it does not lead to their elimination. Instead, the crisis scales their meaning down to the dimension of stories about human fate. What remains in the aftermath of the crisis is "little stories" illustrating human existence in the world, narratives

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12. Martin Heidegger has introduced this term in his essay *Die Frage nach der Technik* [The Question Concerning Technology], originally published in 1954, in the already quoted *Vorträge und Aufsätze*.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 171.

about feelings, in which the irritating question about their validity in situations when we face difficult moral choices looms large.[14]

If hermeneutics is to be the *koiné* of the modern world, then the concept of *logos* should be modified. For Vattimo, this is not an idea shared by everyone, but a borderline idea indicating the formal inclination towards the universalization of perceived values.[15] The awareness of their existence contextualizes individual moral judgments: it is a kind of "weak" axiological background, rooted in feelings, whose contours are blurred, inviting further interpretations. We do not get to see this background in discourse. Its existence manifests itself to us in concrete experiences of compassion, in sympathy with the suffering other. The adoption of the position of distance with respect to violence perpetrated on metaphysical premises leads to the building of one's distance with respect to norms of behavior. Such a recognition occurs when we discover that in some situations ethical behavior requires actions contrary to social norms or questioning the inherited code of ethics. The subject perceives such a rift as a conflict of conscience. Ethical principles embedded in institutional practices are often based on the mistrust towards subjective moral intuition, which leads to the codification of formalized rules of conduct, based on the logic of duty and imposed responsibility. Ostensibly, such a process eliminates the factor of unpredictability of the organization's operation. As a matter of fact, however, the good that we give to others and the good that we receive from them, circulates, as it were, outside the context of procedures and commands.

Pietas is an unmediated feeling, manifesting itself in relationships with others. Owing to these qualities, it makes the cognition of values possible *beyond* the rhetoric of institutional coercion. Vattimo resolved that when the claims of the arbitrary imperative are eliminated, we discover values as "monuments to tradition." We then begin to recognize the values considered "weak" – such as love, kindness, pity, compassion, or caring – as fundamental to the social dimension of life.[16] Recognizing their meaning, however, requires the development of a distance with respect to the rhetoric of duty. Vattimo believes that the decay of metaphysics does not trigger the decay of *pietas*. When we discover that authority-based ethics are nothing but "human," "super-human," or even "all too human" productions, then we may choose to reject them altogether or to keep them. The Italian

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14. Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 31–32.

15. Michał Januszkiewicz, "Hermeneutyka i nihilizm. Wokół 'myśli słabej' Gianniego Vattimo" [Hermeneutics and Nihilism. Around the 'weak thought' of Gianni Vattimo], in: *Hermeneutyka i literatura – ku nowej* koiné [Hermeneutics and Literature – Towards a New *Koiné*], ed. Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, Michał Januszkiewicz (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2006), 135–157.

16. Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," in: *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (New York: Suny Press, 2012), 39–52.

philosopher calls for the latter: such ethics become important and even dear to us because they are all we have at our disposal. They assert the richness of our experience and are a unique expression of our human being-in-the-world.[17] Importantly, the value system should not be confused with the values themselves. Indeed, along with the annulment of the metaphysical structure, the system of values, that is, that which schematizes the internal axiological experience, becomes null-and-void, but that is not tantamount to the rejection of values themselves.

In such a context, however, the question arises whether the subject, relying on *pietas*, is able to define the principles of coexistence with other people and build a concrete model of social order? Moral sensitivity based on values needs a broader context to better express the values' normative meaning. Vattimo argued that we have no other way of experiencing being than the shock of the initial misunderstanding, of the *Missverstehen* that we experience in the face of what we find different and therefore incomprehensible.[18] The experience of one's difference-as-misunderstanding is also the discovery of one's own individuality and, simultaneously, of the feeling of loneliness revealed in the process (I discover that "I" feel differently than do others around me). A person sensitive to values may face the denial of social recognition.

For the purpose of demonstrating the complexity of feelings, we can refer to the *Heart of Darkness*, the well-known novelette by Joseph Conrad. I propose that the metaphor of "darkness" should not be read as referring to the African jungle and the Europeans perpetrating acts of violence against Congolese natives, but to the ambiguity of the protagonist's feelings as he tells his story. The narrator of the novelette recalls Charlie Marlow's account of his expedition to Congo, the then Belgian colony, at the culminating moment of which he meets Kurtz, the manager of one of the more remote trade posts in the Belgian part of Africa. At the sight of the tyrant dying, however, his urge to kill the latter vanishes as feelings of opposite nature swell up. As Marlow listens to Kurtz's story, his compassion, bordering on pity, ousts fury. Towards the end of his encounter, Charlie is ready to help the dying man, and promises Kurtz to deliver his letter to his fiancée, waiting for him in Europe. The murkiness of Marlow's feelings is even more pronounced in the scene, in which the protagonist hands the letter to Kurtz's Intended; it is then that his *pietas* is revealed once again. He intuitively "reads" the woman as someone expecting words of comfort and encouragement, which results in his choice not to represent her fiancé as a soulless tyrant, but as someone extraordinary, brave, with a bold vision of the future. The experience of the ambiguity of emotions urges Marlow

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17. Vattimo, "The End of (Hi)story," 27–28.

18. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 140.

to falsify the truth about Kurtz's actions.[19] Thus, in the conversation with Kurtz's fiancée, the very heart of the darkness of Marlow's feelings becomes revealed in all clarity. Paradoxically, Marlow finds inner peace in activities related to the routine operations of the steamer – in his interactions with the orderly machinery of the ship. He regains his tranquility while reading a book on steamships.[20]

In one of his essays, James Clifford argues that Marlow's self-narrative is limited to his own world in the culture-centric sense of the phrase. For the purposes of our deliberations, we might add that the limitation Clifford mentions is also emotion-bound. *Heart of Darkness* is not only a description of a culturally alienated individual, but also an insight into the ambiguity of human feelings. The question is whether adopting the perspective of hermeneutic philosophy, we can repeat after Marlow: "Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know […]."[21] We may doubt whether we *see* Marlow correctly, and likewise we may doubt whether we adequately *understand* our own feelings; it seems doubtless, however, that this ambivalence of feelings is cognitively intriguing.

The outcomes of the efforts made to understand feelings may turn out surprising but also, quite possibly, painful. We need courage to become involved with the process of understanding emotional states. Since feelings lead us deep into the "dark" areas of personality, doubts arise as to whether it may not be better to stick to the rules of reason and trust what is rational. Discovering the role of feelings in the process of getting to know oneself involves the experience of risk, which becomes palpable for several reasons: (1) we may face problems trying to understand our own feelings; (2) we have no guarantee that we are able to communicate these feelings properly to others; (3) we do not know if someone will reciprocate our feelings; (4) we have doubts whether, while communicating then, we can give our feelings an adequate meaning. It is therefore worth venturing further into this debate to see in what sense the model of argumentation developed within hermeneutic philosophy may be useful for the purpose of the understanding of feelings. *Pietas*, beyond doubt, requires interpretation. If so, then it makes sense to delve deeper into the concept proposed by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor.

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19. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in: *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 6th ed., vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 1759–1817.

20. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski," in: *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 140–162.

21. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness, 1814.*

The Hermeneutics of Feelings

According to Taylor, the human is someone constantly looking for authenticity of being-in-the-world. His or her search relies on cultural narratives that he or she finds familiar. They allow one to articulate feelings and describe the reasons why these feelings are, or have been, understood incorrectly. However, unlike Hans-Georg Gadamer, the Canadian philosopher does not focus on the act of interpretation itself, but on hermeneutics understood as the process of the assignment of meanings to "human situations," which locates Taylor's way of thinking closer to Vattimo's. The human is a being who interprets him or herself based on his or her own emotional experiences and relationships that connect him or her to other people.[22] The "human situation" is thus a consequence of the understanding of lived experiences.

The process of subject's self-interpretation takes place in the axiological horizon, when we face a choice between what is right and what is wrong for us, or between what is better and what is worse. Axiological choices set humans apart from animals; animals feel, but they do not interpret their feelings, or at least we do not know anything about it. In his analyses, Taylor relies upon the concept of *strong evaluation*, which refers to the pre-assumptions of the human (subjective) axiological orientations. We rely on strong evaluation when, out of many possible actions we can take, we dismiss some and choose others, judging them as morally better.[23]

Taylor looks for the sources of "strong evaluation" at the level of the "community of meanings," that is, in the space of the similar understanding of values. The carriers of meaning are the contents inscribed into the structure of the language and into historically established practices of social behavior, with which frame of reference we have been culturally equipped with in order to be able to justify our own conduct. Hermeneutic narratives provide justifications for human commitment to the reification of certain values.[24] The human being is a self-interpreting animal; our self-interpretation is the basic determinant of our humanity. To articulate something adequately means more than just to convey information. To express oneself accurately, one becomes committed to the searching for the right word to properly name one's own feelings and to understand the feelings of others.

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22. Nicholas H. Smith, "Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition," in: *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abby (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–51, https://doi.org//10.1017/CBO9780511610837.002.

23. See Arto Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation Without Sources. On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Cultural Moral Realism* (Jyväskylä: Univeristy of Jyväskylä, 2003), 29–30.

24. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge–London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 162–163.

The community of feelings finds its expression both in the language and in the cultural tradition.[25]

The hermeneutics of moral experience is a function of the sensitivity to the world of values and of the internal abilities of the subject, owing to which he or she develops moral competences understood here as an "exercise-concept." The universalization of the "human situation" presupposes a particular openness to conversation coupled with one's readiness to arrive at a *con*-sens-us.[26] The hermeneutic language of understanding feelings requires both self-reflection and active commitment to a conversation about feelings carried with other subjects, likewise involved in the process of self-interpretation. We certainly converse with our contemporaries, who alive today, but, owing to the existence of many texts of culture, we may also talk to those who lived before us. Feelings that we interpret come in different hues and in a variety of intensities of sensation, which is why self-reflection sometimes requires a particular type of interpretive courage. In this regard, Taylor wrote that

> […] experiencing a given emotion involves experiencing our situation as being of a certain kind or having a certain property. But this property cannot be neutral, cannot be something to which we are indifferent, or else we would not be moved. Rather, experiencing an emotion is to be aware of our situation as humiliating, or shameful, or outrageous, or exhilarating, or wonderful, and so on. Each of these adjectives defines what I would like to call an import, if I introduce this as term of art. By an "import," if I mean a way in which something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations of feelings of a subject; or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject. But the "whereby" in the previous clause in meant in a strong sense. In identifying the import of a given situation we are picking out what in the situation gives the grounds or basis of our feelings, or what could give such grounds, or perhaps should give such grounds, if we feel nothing or have inappropriate feelings. We are not just stating that we experience a certain feeling in this situation.[27]

It is not the feeling that plays the central role in this context: it is the *meaning* we attribute to it. By analogy, Taylor's claim may be applied to the reading of cultural texts – literature, poetry, or films that move us – whose authors described their own feelings and bestowed on them a universal meaning. One may direct one's feelings towards oneself, which renders these feelings secondary

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25. See Charles Taylor, "Humanizm i nowoczesna tożsamość" [Humanism and Modern Identity], in: *Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, vol. 1, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Warszawa–Kraków: Centrum Myśli Jana Pawła II – Wydawnictwo Znak, 2010), 102.

26. See Włodzimierz Lorenc, *Hermeneutyczne koncepcje człowieka. W kręgu inspiracji heideggerowskich* [Hermeneutic Concepts of Man. In the Circle of Heideggerian Inspirations] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe "Scholar," 2003), 307–311.

27. Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in: *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 48–49.

to the feelings that one directs towards others. Such feelings may be symptomatic of loneliness, depression, fear, despair, helplessness, or they could be manifestations of joy, good attitude, energy to act, or commitment. We describe some emotions as disagreeable or destructive because they violate our sense of dignity, which value becomes our attribute in the process of self-interpretation. The human subject, however, is not always inclined to focus on experiences of this type; in many cases he or she clearly seeks to distance him or herself from them. And yet, the lack of sensitivity to the experience of moral shame would render us incapable of recognizing dignity as an essential value. In this approach, the sense of dignity that we attribute to ourselves is inextricably connected with the sense of shame, which surfaces whenever we do something inconsistent with this value.

Taylor writes thus:

> For the shameful is not a property which can hold of something quite independent of the experience subjects have of it. Rather, the very account of what shame means involves reference to things – like our sense of dignity, of worth, of how we are seen by others – which are essentially bound up with the life of a subject of experience. [...] It may be something that is presupposed by this experience or gives it its shape, like aspiration to dignity or, even less immediately, one to integrity, or wholeness, or fulfilment, about which we can only speculate or offer controvertible interpretations.[28]

The point is not whether we understand dignity correctly, but that this value is an important prerequisite in defining our own identity, but also in building relationships with other people. This requires that we function within the "community of meanings," a community sharing a similar understanding of the value of dignity. The language serving the purpose of naming values allows us to do much more than just to label our desires and preferences. Working on the development of one's own competences one requires immersion in a linguistic space that, by way of conversation, would be conducive to the reinforcement of behaviors considered appropriate (for example: helping a grieving person is commendable, while insensitivity to human suffering is reprehensible). Our participation in the community of meanings enables us to be understood by others and to communicate our own interpretations of values to other. We are able to perceive the proper sense of the value of compassion only when we associate it with other values, such as respect for, and recognition of, the right to be different from another human being. By the same token, we discover the proper meaning of *pietas* through the lens of its relations to other values; some of these relational connections have already been named, others are yet to be discovered. Today, we focus primarily on the importance of the relationship between personal dignity and the recognition of the value

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28. Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," 54–55.

of the diversity of different lifestyles; the burning questions of the present are those concerning the limits of our acceptance of the difference.

Unlike such thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Charles Taylor abstains from defining humanity through its connection with rationality, typical of the modern concept of practical philosophy. Instead, the Canadian philosopher sees the essence of humanity in the ability to interpret feelings. Still, the recognition of the fundamental role of feelings in moral argumentation does not imply unconditional acceptance of all human feelings. The limits for such an acceptance are variedly defined, because the delineation of boundaries is a function of the axiology underlying the unity of a particular community of meanings. *Pietas* needs an axiological and cultural context so that the forms of engagement we adopt become understandable, and, as a rule, we take this context for granted. We only question the universality of *pietas* in contact with another cultural tradition and its own "community of meanings" that differs from our own.

The Canadian philosopher pointed out that at the center of the "community of meanings" developed in the Western cultures is the value of the dignity of the human person. Rooted in the Greek, and then Christian, traditions, its meaning is subject to ongoing readings and re-readings. Interpretative culture allows one to enter into debates on how to understand and reify the value of dignity in relation to complex human situations, yet, while engaging others in a dialog concerning dignity's practical dimension (the observance of the principle of respect for human dignity), one assumes that interlocutors are able to determine appropriate ways to implement this value in cultural practice.[29] For example, one's indignation at the instrumental treatment of people can be understood on condition that others recognize and respect the same value.[30]

Taylor did not write about the order of values, nor did he create a moral deontology. In his view, values are inscribed in the formula of "strong evaluation" as components of our cultural inheritance, to which we resort whenever we need to distinguish what is good for us from what is bad, whenever we need to tell right from wrong, or decide upon what is better for us and what is worse. Such an evaluation may become an object of an analysis, but it does not have its own representation in the same sense, in which ideal entities, such as Plato's ideas or abstract object, do.[31] Values, discursivized in interpretations, are a collective

29. See Hugh Williams, *Dialogical Practice and Ontology of the Human Person* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 2010), 11–12.

30. Charles Taylor, "The Concept of Person," in: *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 99–100.

31. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 280.

"monument" to tradition, and, at the same time, serve as moral guidelines, allowing us to define the standards of proper conduct.[32]

Vattimo and Taylor

The hereby offered example of the analysis of the concepts proposed by Vattimo and Taylor demonstrates that hermeneutic philosophy is not only invested in the problem of values, but that it also appreciates the role of feelings in the process of getting to know them. The work of both scholars epitomizes the unique "practical" turn in hermeneutic philosophy. Both thinkers address human experience, focusing, in particular, on moral issues. The analysis of human emotional states requires an interpretation rooted in culture, and thereby also in language and history. Vattimo criticized metaphysical narratives on account of the fact that they generate institutional forms of coercion and violence – and it would be hard to deny the merit of his objection. The institutional approach to ethical principles transforms the latter into guardians of procedures and, by that token, it generates automatic behaviors. Ultimately diminishing the importance of individual moral sensitivity, such narratives undermine the power of conscience as the source of moral power. The Italian philosopher juxtaposes ethics based on the rhetoric of coercion with what he calls "weak" ethics: the ethics detached from the metaphysical basis and founded on *pietas* – compassion, kindness, love, friendship, and care.

His critique of metaphysics manifests itself in the fact that Vattimo refrains from inquiring into the structure and connections existing in the world of values. Although he understands *pietas* as part of tradition, he fails to account for its contextual meaning. This drawback results in the difficulty to demonstrate the importance of compassion in relation to other values. This becomes particularly apparent in the contexts of misunderstanding/failure-to-understand, when the subject must choose between different values, yet cannot determine which of them to treat as "more important" than others. For example, it is impossible to say why actions based on *pietas* (mercy) should qualitatively be "better" than actions resulting from the observance of the rules. Such dilemmas awaken doubts as to whether, observing *pietas*, we are able to reach a consensus with other people who also embrace it. Will every moral subject understand *pietas* the way we do? *Pietas* may mislead us: when we show compassion to someone who unscrupulously uses our kindness and exploits our readiness to help, we may lose our ability to see the world in the right proportions.

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32. Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," in: *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 251–253.

Pietas must be legible within the "community of meaning," in which our behaviors become understandable. The advantages of the "weak nihilism" program stem from the fact that it weakens the logos's claim to the total understanding of the principles of institutional life. Vattimo spoke out in favor of the "weak" ethics that rejects the rhetoric of punishment, reward, or "eternal" damnation. The concept of the "weak" nihilism points out to the relational and dialogical nature of the understanding of values and of the complex situations, in which the subject may find herself or himself. The question which Vattimo's concept seems to beg is whether we can treat feelings as indicators of good behavior while disregarding axiological structures and without a specific cultural model of "good living." Ultimately, it seems impossible. Even though it can be assumed that the original source of moral behavior rests with the feelings, in order to define our own moral competences we need a reflective insight, we need the ability to draw conclusions from wrong decisions, as well as the qualities of character (virtues) that we practice while solving difficult situations.

Taylor adopts the thesis that the interpretation of feelings is the fundamental dimension of self-understanding, and that the "strong evaluation" functions as the background for individual axiological orientations and the moral choices resulting thereof. Therefore, in his vision, the feelings related to *pietas* (of which Vattimo wrote) are placed in a cultural context and, consequently, within an axiological structure in which the value of human dignity plays a key role. The Canadian philosopher is critical of the behavioral concept of values, in which the latter are treated as equivalents of human biological and social needs. In his view, the world of values belongs in the dimension of spirit and culture, in which a person discovers modes of self-reflection and ways towards fulfilment in life, but in which he or she may also critically evaluate what he or she discovers and seek other ways of self-interpretation. Values do not constitute a separate world of ideas; rather, they are a collection of potential opportunities embedded in cultural tradition.

The above notwithstanding, Taylor's concept lacks a clear distinction between moral values and other types of values; in this respect, his proposition remains underdeveloped. Likewise, he offers no guidelines on how to implement the postulate of "good life," concentrating on the historical interpretations of this postulate instead. At the same time, he is aware that the importance of "weakness" – human imperfection, partiality of human moral competences – must be properly recognized. The Canadian philosopher combines elements of expressivism with the appreciation for the Christian tradition, and with the openness to diversity and dialogue with other cultural and religious traditions.[33]

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33. Michiel Meijer, "Is Charles Taylor (Still) a Weak Ontologist?" *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, no. 56 (1) (2017), 65–87.

The advantage of the philosophy of values proposed by Taylor is the fact that it rests upon the fundament of an in-depth analysis of the role of feelings in the process of the understanding of the human situation – especially in relation to subjective moral competences. His description of human experiences reveals the relational connection between feelings and the world of values. Understanding is thus the condition that must be met before meanings can be bestowed on one's own feelings or the feelings of others. Participating in the "community of meanings," we are looking for the foundations of self-understanding and for the *con*-sensus with others. Establishing a rapport in the form of a conversation, we embark upon a quest for what unites us, what sometimes makes it possible to arrive at a mutual understanding, or, otherwise, what makes us different. Formulating what sets us apart and naming the differences, however, should not lead to resentment or verbal aggression. Language creates what can be called public space, or a vantage point, from which we observe the world together.[34] It calls into existence a particular multi-generational "agora," in which the exchange of the knowledge about values takes place. This conversation has been going on for centuries, which results in the fact that the statements thus far recorded in the texts of culture have come to constitute the axiological background for conversations taking place today. Paradoxically, although Vattimo used the term "monuments of tradition" while discussing values, he extracted them from their metaphysical and religious contexts. On the contrary, Taylor points to the topicality of these "monuments" in the context of resolving moral problems, and, in contrast to Vattimo, he acknowledges the importance of the religious foundations of culture in the process of the understanding of values.

In conclusion, it should be recognized that Charles Taylor's concept has the potential to create an ethics that would not be reducible to a rigid set of rules: an ethics, in which human sensitivity to values – and to the idiosyncratic "good" of another person – is central. Such an ethics would be based on the concept of human conscience capable of acting beyond the schematic rules of conduct and algorithmic procedures. The understanding of values requires that the subject, on the one hand, be aware of their universal importance, and on the other, relate them to complex human situations. Such a "double-reading" of values is an important aspect of the Western tradition; it is worth remembering it when solving contemporary moral problems and working towards the establishment of an ethical model of coexistence in a multicultural society.

One should agree with Taylor's thesis that man is a being capable of self-interpretation. Hermeneutic philosophy provides ways of understanding feelings and desires, which allows one to place individual preferences in a broader axiological

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34. Taylor, *Theories of Meaning*, 257.

context. The ability to interpret feelings defines the conceptual framework of humanity – and within this frame of reference the value of human dignity and respect for other people play the key roles. The human situation which forces us to face trials and tribulations of war, pestilence, or natural disasters, is a difficult situation: one that conventional rules fail to encompass. Such situations call for a step beyond what is familiar; they require moral heroism. In such contexts we refer to simple feelings (*pietas*), founded on our ability to empathize with those who suffer, who are hopeless, who are lonely. In such contexts, meeting thy neighbor (whom thy lovest as thyself) is, in fact, an emotional experience powerful enough to disarm the paradigm of division: we are no longer family vs. strangers, no longer enemies vs. friends. A stranger who no longer is a stranger ceases to be perceived as a threat to our safety or comfort. Attaining this awareness is the cultural task we face in order to address the phenomena of economic migration and refugee-ism with a clear conscience.

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