

## **Rationality and the Crisis of Meaning: Confrontation between Science and Religion in the Sphere of Consciousness**

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### **Abstract**

The crisis of meaning, as a characteristic of modern world, was investigated mainly from a philosophical perspective, considering necessary and sufficient conditions of the meaning of life, without regard to crucial social transformations of modern era, which led to this crisis. Focusing on the process of changes in knowledge and consciousness, here I show that in the modern world, as a result of developments in science, for the first time the natural or scientific consciousness seriously confronts the supernatural or religious consciousness. The argument is that because of this plurality of consciousness, the basic characteristics of man, i.e., identity, self, and rationality, have changed. The main idea of this article is that, based on such an explanation of the crisis of meaning in which consciousness and knowledge are pivotal, the solution resides in reconsidering modern rationality in order for these two sorts of consciousness to be united and for the crisis to be cured.

**Keywords:** Plurality of consciousness, science and religion, fact and value, crisis of meaning, rationality.

### **Introduction**

The crisis of meaning has broad dimensions and it can be considered in different areas with diverse levels of analysis, since we are dealing with man's life and existence. It is not possible to address all aspects of this issue, but we should try to consider as many of its aspects as possible. A comprehensive study of this topic involves various disciplines such as philosophy, humanities, social, and even (more recently) empirical sciences, from abstract and ontological debates to more concrete and tangible issues in the public sphere, and in general, it calls for the problem of living in the world. This broadness, however, does not mean that the main concepts and the level of analysis cannot be limited. It seems that

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two poles, philosophy and science, are decisive in determining the level of analysis in dealing with the crisis of meaning.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel drew boundaries between philosophy, which relies on thought and “is done just by asking questions, arguing, trying out ideas and thinking of possible arguments against them, and wondering how our concepts really work,” and science, which relies on “experiments or observation” (Nagel 1987, 4). This distinction, which is based on the thought/experience dichotomy, warns philosophers against the risk of their methods; that is, “a tendency to define the legitimate questions in terms of the available methods of solution...but it is insane in any field, and especially in philosophy” (Nagel 1979, x).

The question concerning the meaning of life has been one of the most important questions of philosophy. There is a common philosophical view to the effect that meaning is not constrained by time and space. It is assumed that, by manipulating and acting on a series of concepts and measuring the relation between these concepts, the crisis of meaning can be remedied. For example, a person who has experienced the crisis of meaning finds a new insight by processing a handful of propositions and concepts in a philosophical article, and his life becomes meaningful. Analytic philosophers want to know what factors, conditions, and concepts make life meaningful since “a majority of contemporary analytic philosophers believe that there are certain things one ought to want or aim for, in order for one’s life to be meaningful” (Metz 2007, 203). In order to answer that, a factor such as “wealth” is investigated and then it is proved that it is inadequate to make life meaningful. From this analytic perspective, “the meaning of life” is a definition or an analysis that expresses the “necessary and sufficient conditions” for meaning. Of course, the definition and analysis are based on certain propositional principles, since “most recent discussions of meaning in life are attempts to capture in a single principle all the variegated conditions that can confer meaning on life” (Metz 2013, 1). In other words, the aim of a philosophical “theory” of the meaning of life is “to describe the ‘underlying structure’ of a significant existence in as few principles as possible” (Metz 2001, 138).

In contrast to this view, however, the crisis of meaning is a new and widespread problem, which has roots in the real world outside of the concepts and propositions and their manipulations in the human mind, and so it cannot be understood and analyzed through subjective reflections and working on a set of principles. In modern times, a transformation has

occurred at the level of consciousness, at which the crisis of meaning is understandable. Based on a characteristic of this change, known as modernization of consciousness, secular reason and science are used to explain the world and the status of man in it. Now, as far as meaning and its crisis are concerned, it seems that the world outside of the concepts has become so real that it may be argued that the mere consideration of philosophical articulations of the meaning of life would be an “insane” introspection. It is in accordance with the idea that, in the modern age, social institutions changed dramatically (e.g., Berger 1979, Taylor 1989, Giddens 1991). Because of these changes, mind, self, and human identity have undergone a fundamental transformation. Modern humans, in terms of mind, identity, and perception, have characteristics that are very different from those of pre-modern humans (Giddens 1991, 105-56). These mutual transformations can explain the crisis of meaning or why it became so vital and serious for man to find out what the meaning of life is.

On this analysis, for the first time “moderns can anxiously doubt whether life has meaning, or wonder what its meaning is” (Taylor 1989, 16). Now, religious frameworks that previously made the world meaningful have become problematic, and we have to create our own meaning, because the process of scientific success in the present age has undermined these frameworks. The crisis of meaning stems from the weakening of these meaningful frameworks. From now on, we have to talk about inventing, rather than discovering, the meaning. The invention of meaning depends on the power of our expression, which is what we have to create (Taylor 1989, 18). Since, on this view, there has not been such a problem before, the key question is what conditions have given rise to this new question in modern times and what the solution is.

In what follows, from an interdisciplinary point of view; namely, conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the sociology of knowledge and philosophy, the roots of the crisis of meaning in the present age is analyzed and a solution is proposed. First, we will see that “the plurality of consciousness,” the confrontation between science and religion in the sphere of consciousness, is an alternative to the classical theory of secularization. I will then argue that this plurality is relevant to the separation of science and religion. Finally, since the plurality of consciousness affected man's basic characteristics; namely, rationality, identity, and self, and naturally led to the crisis of meaning, modern rationality should be reconsidered as a solution.

After a discussion in these three stages, we will see that the separation between scientific and religious types of consciousness pertains to disengaged identity and self as well as the crisis of meaning, and that all these pluralities and discontinuities originate in modern foundational rationality. Of course, this introspective rationality, which results in the distinction between self and world, and the focus on the inside to find meaning, is not a universal phenomenon, but is a product of a special process of self-interpretation that has taken place in the West and is not dominant in other cultures (Taylor 1989, 111). Finally, assuming a meaningful relationship between the crisis of meaning and the plurality of consciousness, a solution will be proposed for this crisis.

### **1. Plurality of Consciousness**

Modern times have seen changes within and without. Meaning is multidimensional; that is, it has different levels that should be considered in its examination. The multiplicity of meaning means its relation to the basic characteristics of man as self, identity, and consciousness, on the one hand, and on the other, it refers to the influence of the structure of society (Berger & Luckmann 1995, 10). Perhaps Max Weber presented the most important classical analysis of modern structural constraints and their impact on human characteristics.

For Weber, modern world was a paradoxical world whose material advancement undermines individual creativity and autonomy. He used the term “iron cage” to show the profound influence of social structures on man (Thompson 1996, 199). He referred to the concept of “demystification of the world” to suggest that scientific knowledge and natural views replace religious awareness and supernatural vision. Because of these changes, empirical science has separated from metaphysics. This separation renders rationality a mere instrument to describe what it is, and unable to prescribe what ought to be done (Alexander 2013, 37), which involves “the reduction of religious ethics and ultimate beliefs to rational calculation and routinized this-worldly action” (Gane 2002, 2). Based on this analysis, the process of disenchantment or demystification led to the elimination of values and underscored the boundary between fact and value. As a result, man faced important questions about the meaning of life, because “science is ... not to be used to create values or properties which may in turn guide our lives; rather it is to be confined to the realm of fact not value”

(Gane 2002, 61). The traditional secularization theory, in accordance to Weberian demystification, means “a loss of influence of religious institutions on society as well as the loss of credibility of religious interpretation in people's consciousness” (Berger 1995, 36).

However, it seems that now, unlike the time of Weber and classical secularization theorists, the crisis of meaning is more relevant to the plurality of consciousness than to the elimination of values. Works in the fields of sociology of knowledge and philosophy support this view.

First, according to sociology of knowledge, Weberian dualities of fact/value and science/religion are replaced by the phenomenon of the plurality of consciousness: Modern life is disintegrated and fall into pieces, both at the level of social behavior and at the level of individual consciousness (Berger 1979, 62-63). Therefore, based on empirical findings and contrary to the classical theory of secularization, modernity did not result in secularization. Instead, it created a serious plurality of religious and secular discourses (including science, politics, education, etc.) as two major rivals (Berger 2014, ix). Based on this plurality of the secular and the religious, secularism is defined as “differentiation” in the sense that pre-modern religious institutions are now divided into secular and religious institutions (Berger 2014, x), and the plurality of secular and religious affairs in human consciousness is a reflection of a similar plurality in society.

Second, philosophically speaking, instead of political secularism (the weakening of religion as a social institution) and social secularism (the decline in religious beliefs and practices among ordinary people), a third secularism is the case now, which is “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (Taylor 2007, 3).

Generally, based on the connection between mind and society, the secular/religious plurality of social institutions has an equivalent in the sphere of consciousness. Of course, those for whom the transcendent was important now constitute “cognitive minorities,” since their views on the world differ significantly from the majority view (Berger 1970, 6). Based on the multiplicity of consciousness in the present era, in what follows I argue for a new understanding of the relationship between science and religion.

## 2. Confrontation between Science and Religion

Science and religion have different ontological and anthropological assumptions. The relationship between science and religion can be studied as a relationship between two different institutions, ontologies, theoretical fields, or in the form of two different sources of consciousness. In different periods, one or another form of the plurality of consciousness is more prominent so that “the problematical relationship between science and religion should be seen as the contemporary form of the age-old ‘faith and reason’ problem par excellence” (Van Huyssteen 1999, 2). With this view of the relationship, we will first see that, in the framework of modern rationality, science and religion are distinct domains, and it is only in terms of methodology that one can consider a relation between them. From this perspective, there is a fundamental differentiation between the two domains, which can be in the methodological forms of conflict, dialogue, independence, and integration (Barbour 2000). Under the new conditions of the plurality of consciousness, however, a new look is needed to understand the relationship between science and religion.

First, according to the methodological approach of modern rationality to the relationship between science and religion, independence of the two domains can be explained in terms of the distinction between value and reality. This particular view of the relationship between science and religion can be seen in many works written in the field of philosophy and sociology. Today as we understand the universe in terms of the categories of science and religion and distinguish the domain of fact from that of value (Harrison 2015, ix). In the pre-modern era, value and hence the meaning of life were deemed pre-existing, objective, and real, and there was no distinction or discrepancy in the world between what is real and what is valuable. Values were real, meaningful, and reasonable. Now, the spread of natural science and the modern rationality has led to this separation (Rossouw 1993, 896-97). Furthermore, atheistic discourses were shaped on the claim that the expansion of the field of natural science has limited the scope of religion. Things were very different in the pre-modern era, where things were entirely in the realm of values and were characterized by culture and religion (Harris 2010, 1). These ideas are in accordance with the disenchantment idea that, in the modern era, value is replaced by fact (see Weber 1978).

Also, according to a methodological approach to the relationship between science and religion, before the expansion of science, what was

expressed in the form of religious propositions could be utilized to describe the reality, but with the advent of this new rival, the claim that religion contains propositions about fact is seriously challenged. Even atheists used “inability of religious propositions for truth claims” to argue against effectiveness of religion (Teske 2010, 92). Moreover, on this particular view of the relationship between science and religion, the confrontation between science and religion did not end with the removal of religion from the realm of reality, since even ethics, value, and meaning can be explained without a need for a supernatural source (Thagard 2010, 14).

However, the question is whether it is possible to separate fact and value from each other and, as a result, assert the separation of science and religion. Today, it seems that the interconnection depends entirely on the will and diligence of the religious man to make values responsive. Now we know that the explicit distinction between fact and value is impossible since, based on is/ought and fact/value dichotomies, values are not part of reality, but are the projections of mind (Taylor 1989, 56). Rejecting the distinction between value and reality can make them objective and real; value is something that really matters for us and enables and leads us to prefer one thing to another. Value is an inseparable part of man and forms his identity and self (Taylor 1989, 25-32). Now, how one can we explain the unity of fact and value and hence the possibility of engagement between science and religion? Moreover, why in the first place were these two sources of consciousness disintegrated in modern times?

As discussed earlier, in modern times, a plurality of consciousness has emerged due to the simultaneous and serious existence of religious and secular sorts of consciousness. However, the secular and the religious are not fixed categories in all times. Because different societies have experienced the tension between religious and secular values in different ways, there is not a single and universal process of secularization that can be attributed to science or another factor (Brooke 2010, 114). Therefore, by defining “secularization” in terms of the “plurality of consciousness,” science is not the cause of secularization, but in the modern era, scientific consciousness is posed as “the secular” against religious consciousness, and the conflict between religion and science (as the secular) over reality is formed in the sphere of consciousness. Nowadays, science seems to be secularized because it has led to the emergence of materialism, and this frame of meaning is the product of a value or moral attitude (with the

ultimate goal of advancement and prosperity), not a scientific fact or reality (Taylor 2007, 18).

Therefore, in order to analyze the relationship between science and religion, on the one hand, and between fact and value, on the other, the current condition of the plurality of consciousness should be taken into account. Before the modern era, supernatural supremacy was assumed in human consciousness and there was less need for deliberate reflection on it, but in the present circumstances, the natural readings of the world and man caused suspicions and uncertainties about the supernatural. Consequently, preserving religious values depends on a conscious and continuous process of thinking and meditation, in order for a supernatural interpretation of reality to be justified as reasonable and real (Luhrmann 2012, xviii). There is a real competition between different types of consciousness, because one who believes in the supernatural should be cognitively effortful in order to defend his religious insight against natural and scientific knowledge (Berger 1970, 18). That is the transition from “compactness” (experience of a unified world) to “differentiation” (where the transcendence and the immanence are disengaged). However, modern science and technology inevitably act in an immanent frame where God does not exist, and its enormous success has made it attractive and dominant (Berger 2014, 51-52).

In what follows, using conceptual and theoretical frameworks in philosophy and sociology, I show that the plurality of scientific and religious sorts of knowledge has a wider scope because modernity has transformed the other features of human existence; namely, self and identity, and has created a real crisis of meaning. The main idea is that different supernatural and natural sources influence self and human identity, because both sources have an enormous influence in modern times.

### **3. Transformations of Self/Identity and the Crisis of Meaning**

The question of human identity is one of value and evaluation. Value and meaning-seeking are among inextricable characteristics of the human self and identity: Identity is what makes us recognize what matters from what does not (Taylor 1989, 30). Then, since the general and abstract concept of “self” is different from, but related to, the social concept of “identity,” by examining humanity from these two (philosophical and sociological) perspectives, the most important aspects of the crisis of meaning will be defined. “Self” refers to the essence of a person regardless of the



relationship with the other and the social environment. Nevertheless, if self is consciously perceived in the social environment, it forms identity (Giddens 1991, 81).

First, according to theories in sociology of knowledge, the crisis of meaning is rooted in a plurality both in the inner and in the outer human world (Pathak 2005, 15). On the other hand, philosophically speaking, the meaning of life is closely tied to self and identity. Therefore, the change in these human existential qualities has an effect on the formation of the crisis of meaning. In general, all these theorists refer to the fragmentation of self and identity in modern times.

From a sociological point of view, fragmented self and hence the crisis of identity are products of modernity. On this idea, “whereas in traditional and premodern societies the self was firmly embedded in wider, stable systems of meaning and social organization, modern societies have witnessed the breakdown of such order and stability and the concomitant collapse of stable identities” (Woodhead 1999, 54). Now, instead of having an identity, the subject has several identities that sometimes contradict each other (Thompson 1996, 65), because identities are no longer defined “in terms of rigid and predictable social structures and processes” (Bendle 2002, 6). Changes in social structures have cognitive and emotional consequences. Since identity is no longer bound to a particular location and frame, the form of human trust and “existential security” has undergone transformation (Giddens 1991).

Also, from a more philosophical point of view, the subject, defined in relation to a broader cosmic order, is now self-defining (Taylor 1977, 6). Therefore, the self becomes more private, and the philosophy of being turns into a philosophy of knowledge with no connection to a cosmic entity (Flood 2014, 2).

The fragmentation of self and the identity crisis are related to the plurality of science and religion in the sphere of consciousness, because they provide different sources for identity. The two sources of self and morality are: (1) “theistic grounding” and (2) “naturalism of disengaged reason, which in our day takes scientific forms” (Taylor 1989, 495). Two main branches of the western culture is relevant to these sources. In the first strand, it is necessary to look “beyond the self in order to understand and to perfect the self”. In the second, the self is “bounded, as existing within clear limits, and as taking its allotted place within a wider (natural or providential) order whose laws reason can discern” (Woodhead 1999,

59-61). In general, the self is fragmented, because its sources and frameworks are multiplied. Consequently, life is divided into separate parts, and actions are not understood as part of a whole or metanarrative. As a result, the modern self does not have integrated meaning and identity (Flood 1999, 129).

However, in addition to its fragmentation, the self becomes “buffered,” so that “the source of its most powerful and important emotions” are inside the mind and “there is a clear boundary, allowing us to define an inner base area, grounded in which we can disengage from the rest” (Taylor 2007, 37-38). Now it is quite intelligible to see the buffered and disengaged self as a ground for pure reason and modern foundational rationality, since “only individuals who have freed themselves from all forms of external authority are able to practice disengaged reasoning” (Coleman 2004, 236). The main epistemic features of this reasoning and rationality are “self-evidence, incorrigibility, indubitability, being evident to the senses, and thus being self-authenticating and properly basic (i.e., foundational) for our wider networks of belief” (Huyssteen 1999, 62).

In sum, the most important feature of the modern era is the simultaneous influence of two sorts of consciousness as two sources of knowledge and meaning with the institutions of (secular) science and religion as social counterparts. The sociological view of the crisis of meaning acknowledges the fragmentation of rationality, identity, and self as a result of changes in modern institutions. These fragmentations and the resulting contrast and plurality have made life meaningless because man, who once could decide without reflection, now must stop and think, which causes unrest and uncertainty (Berger 2014, 64). From a philosophical point of view, however, the question of identity has a close relation with the moral question of “what is good?” (Taylor 1979, 30). With the fragmentation of self and identity, choices are also diverse, and what is good and valuable is no longer unified. On the other hand, it seems that the “buffered self” forms a foundational rationality, based on which it is not possible to establish a connection between natural and supernatural types of consciousness to escape the plurality of consciousness. Then, due to the close relationship between identity, meaning, and consciousness, the crisis of identity forms the crisis of meaning.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the crisis of meaning must be considered under specific social and cognitive constraints, which are neglected in the literature of the “meaning of life” in analytic philosophy. According to these real constraints, social transformations of modernity have affected self, identity, and rationality, leading to the crisis of meaning. The crisis is now deeply connected to the plurality of consciousness, which is in turn rooted in a particular pure rationality that does not provide a link between natural and supernatural sorts of consciousness. This rationality, (1) anthropologically, depicts human identity as limited to rational aspects as well as to pure and disengaged reason; (2) epistemologically, provides a narrow view of knowledge claims, in which context and social environment have no role; and (3) has an objectivistic and dualistic perception of the world, based on which the world is reflected in the mind.

In this sense of rationality, man is more and more isolated from his environment and social context, and goes back inward in order to understand himself and his world. Such rationality has highlighted a certain aspect of science and religion. Accordingly, religion and theology are depicted mainly as abstract propositions in the human mind, and science, due to its successes, removes religion from all fields of human endeavors and affairs (including social, moral, intellectual, etc.). Internalizing this rationality, man has believed in the separation of scientific and religious perspectives on reality and because of the fragmented self and identity, he has faced the crisis of meaning.

Obviously, the plurality of consciousness that can be understood by the same plurality in society does not necessarily lead to a plurality of truth or relativism. The former is a product of modern rationality, and many postmodern critical perspectives, escaping modern rationality, have fallen into the trap of the latter. Of course, to connect science and religion, to eliminate the effects of the plurality of consciousness, and ultimately, to solve the crisis of meaning, it is necessary to revise rationality or change the attitude towards man, knowledge, and the world. However, the key question is what kind of rationality can link science and religion and solve the plurality of consciousness without isolating science or religion, and at the same time, without resulting in relativism. In order to find the qualified sort of rationality, the relevant future inquiries should seek to find the real ground of relationship between the spheres set apart by modern pure

rationality. No matter how different our sources of consciousness, we are all living in the real world, and to take our *being in the world* seriously is to consider the role of our bodies. Now under the modern condition of plurality, our bodies, rather than pure mind or mere social structures, can fulfill the anthropological and epistemological needs in *shaping* our new rationality.

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