

# PARTICIPATION IN REALITY: BOTH DISCOVERY AND INVENTION



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## ABSTRACT

*This article uses Charles Taylor's exposition of different forms of meaning as a way of analyzing some of the central themes of Esther Meek's account of realism. The perspective Taylor provides encourages revisiting the way various elements of Meek's argument align with one another, and helps highlight the importance of embodiment and the centrality of the person for all accounts of knowing and being.*

Esther Lightcap Meek's *Contact with Reality* (2017; hereafter, *CWR*) invites careful reflection about a considerable range of issues, but I will herein focus on only a few. In particular, I want to look at the related concepts of "discovery" and "contact," both of which are central to the form of realism Meek advances. I'm sympathetic to Meek's arguments, but would like to suggest a somewhat different way of accounting for both "discovery" (as a descriptor of what happens when we make "contact with reality") and "contact" (as a descriptor of our relationship to reality as occasioned by discovery). My proposal is a fairly simple one: "participation" is a better way of talking about our relationship with reality than "contact," and the difference between these two ways bears on how we think about "discovery."

I'm going to start, not with Meek, but with Charles Taylor, and specifically with a recent proposal of his that has implications for Meek's project. In *The Language Animal*, Taylor (2016; hereafter *LA*) devotes a considerable amount of energy to elucidating the differences between two forms of articulation: one of these forms he describes

in terms of “biological” meanings or “life meanings,” and the other he describes in terms of “metabiological” or “human meanings” (*LA*, 179-180). The former tend to be more instrumental in character, while the latter are more existential: life meanings “can be replaced” by third-person accounts (or, in some cases, by completely impersonal accounts), but human meanings cannot (*LA*, 182). Life meanings more readily translate across cultures, but human meanings are more often “peculiar to certain cultures, or even subgroups with a culture” (*LA*, 183-184). Human meanings thus depend on hermeneutic forms of reasoning and articulation, whereas life meanings do not (*LA*, 255-257).

In the interests of clarification, it’s worth noting these two forms of articulation do not strictly correspond to another important two-fold distinction Taylor makes in *LA*, namely, that between “enframing” views of language and “constitutive-expressive” ones (*LA*, 3-4). This latter distinction is intended to signify two different and competing accounts of language itself, one of which (the enframing view) Taylor identifies with Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac, and the other of which (the constitutive view) he identifies with Haman, Herder, and Humboldt (*LA*, 4-5, 48-50). While it’s right to say those in the enframing tradition tend to put more of their eggs in the basket of biological or life meanings while those in the constitutive tradition tend to put theirs in the basket of metabiological or human meanings, these two binaries should not be conflated (i.e., as we would if we believed life meanings can be understood strictly in terms of the enframing view of language and human meanings in terms of the constitutive view). The reason we should not collapse these binaries into one another will become clear forthwith.

At this point, it’s necessary only to highlight Taylor’s account of the contributions distinctly human meanings make to our understanding and experience. The “semantic dimension” of language, he argues, cannot be reduced to the purely “descriptive dimension” associated with life meanings (*LA*, 25-26). Human meanings help us recognize all forms of language not only symbolically communicate experience but make experience possible in the first place (*LA*, 29). “Discovery and invention are two sides of the same coin” (*LA*, 178), and as we develop new forms of articulation we thereby open up new horizons of meaning and possibility. Language thus enables us not only to expand our awareness and understanding of reality, but *to expand reality itself* by introducing new forms of meaning that in turn evoke new possibilities for identification, expression, and action. Our capacity for language enables us to go far beyond the more utilitarian, instrumental possibilities afforded by life meanings, and gives us “much greater flexibility, a capacity to change, even to transform ourselves, which has no parallel among other animals” (*LA*, 339).

Thus, Taylor’s distinction between life meanings and human meanings—and especially his account of the latter—raises a potential question for Meek: if human

meanings are created at least as much as we might say they are “discovered,” do they signify “contact with reality”? Human meanings, representative as they are of everything from accounts of personal identity, to socio-political standards, to moral rectitude, to aesthetic value, to religious devotion, to any number of additional forms of meaning, seem to be more vulnerable both to the charge of subjectivism and to the predations of skepticism (cf. *LA*, 183-184). Both life meanings and human meanings, Taylor suggests, are open to clarification, correction, and development: life meanings can be (and often are) adjusted on the basis of “external” or “indirect” justifications, whereas human meanings are adjusted on the basis of “internal” or “direct” justifications (*LA*, 197-198). But for someone convinced of the superiority of those forms of articulation that signify life meanings (i.e., their relative apparent objectivity and impartiality), any appeal to internal justification will likely seem to be a kind of special pleading.

This issue can be recast in terms of the problem of self-set standards. Meek, of course, is quite familiar with this problem, and gives it significant attention in *CWR*. In fact, she identifies (though not in any precise or technical manner) two different versions of the problem: we use self-set standards to help us apprehend and understand both what Taylor calls life meanings and what he calls human meanings, but these different usages are not exactly the same because the character or the qualities of the standards are not exactly the same.

Relative to the discovery of life meanings, the problem of self-set standards boils down to a question about how the contingencies of our perceptual, conceptual, and expressive abilities enable us to recognize the rational order of reality (both those dimensions open to our immediate experience and those dimensions that are not, such as the quantum realm). However, it's precisely the comparable thinness of life meanings—i.e., their more instrumental, descriptive, impersonal character—that enables us readily to subject them to objective adjustment and correction: the limitations of our capacities can be overcome by the kind of external or indirect verification Taylor associates with life meanings.

Similarly, Meek describes Polanyi's exposition of the role of intuition in the apprehension of the real: dynamic intuition, strategic intuition, creative intuition, and “confirmatory” intuition all contribute to our recognition and understanding of meaningful *Gestalten* (*CWR*, 44-46). These forms of intuition are employed in “every form of human achievement,” from the most quotidian to the most sophisticated forms of intellectual and artistic striving (*ibid.*), and are likewise open to calibration and correction. Thus, reliance on self-set standards need not compromise our confidence in affirming truth “is not made or invented, but rather discovered” (*CWR*, 56). It may appear we have ourselves selected the standards by which we adjudicate the reliability of our knowledge, Meek suggests, but “it seems more true to say they have imposed themselves on us” (*CWR*, 27). Quoting Polanyi, Meek affirms even the “most daring

feats of originality...must be performed on the assumption they originate nothing, but merely reveal what is there" (*CWR*, 87; quoting *PK*, 130).

Relative to the discovery of human meanings, however, the problem of self-set standards is a bit more complicated. This is not because there exist no external or direct loci by which we might calibrate and/or correct our apprehension of human meanings; community, tradition, and culture all potentially play this role (cf. *LA*, 190). If the only challenge we faced at this point had to do with the question of how the contingencies of our perceptual, conceptual, and expressive abilities enable us to recognize the meaningful *Gestalten* of human meanings, this would simply be a variant of the problem of self-set standards as it applies to the recognition of life meanings.

The problem here, however, is that human meanings (at least as Taylor presents them) *are themselves* self-set standards. The articulation of a human meaning is less a matter of employing self-set standards to apprehend or articulate an independent, objective meaning; rather, the meaning or truth in question is something better thought of as an invention rather than a discovery. The apprehension of a human meaning brings about the possibility of a "new way of feeling, of experiencing our world," a feeling that "doesn't precede the articulation, but comes about through and with it" (*LA*, 188). Such articulation "alters the shape of what matters to us. It changes us" (*LA*, 189). Further, human meanings cannot be teased apart the way life meanings often can; instead, they "impinge on us not singly...but in interconnected skeins" (*LA*, 184). At one point, Meek herself alludes to something that sounds very much in line with Taylor's analysis of human meanings: following Polanyi, she affirms human beings are "capable of producing" new insights and articulations that transform reality by adding new and hitherto unforeseen meanings to it (*CWR*, 68; cf. *PK*, 382-390). For all his realism, Meek admits, whether Polanyi believed "the nature of reality determines the nature of knowledge or vice versa is not entirely clear" (*CWR*, 74).

Of course, one way of addressing this issue would be to deny any qualitative distinction between life meanings and human meanings. One might do so even while granting a distinction between (on the one hand) more quantitative forms of reasoning and articulation and (on the other) more qualitative forms of reasoning and articulation. For example, if one's convictions incline towards materialism, one can argue human meanings are really just life meanings in disguise; given the current state of science it may not (yet) be possible for us to recognize the physical, chemical, and/or biological basis of what we poetically refer to as human meanings, but as our understanding of the natural order continues its inexorable march we'll increasingly be able to recognize the material basis of all meaning (even if we elect, for the sake of convenience, to retain our more poetic forms of expression).

But one can also deny a qualitative distinction between life meanings and human meanings if one's convictions incline in a rather different direction. A theist, for

example, might argue human meanings are real and are indicative of God's will for the world, and as such are, like life meanings, discovered and not invented. We may not be able (as we are with life meanings) to use empirical observation to do so, but we nonetheless come to recognize the independent existence of aesthetic, moral, and/or religious truths in a manner not too dissimilar from the way we come to recognize life meanings (i.e., via the successful implementation of appropriately calibrated perception, subject to a process of on-going clarification and correction).

Taken together, these (admittedly oversimplified) possibilities suggest answering the intertwined questions of whether there are such things as human meanings and whether they are discovered or invented depends on more than just differentiating between instrumental, third-person forms of expression and existential, first-person forms of expression. In other words, how we tackle this question(s) will itself inevitably depend on certain self-set standards we use to determine our answer.

So we have here a set of interdependent questions—a polycentric problem, as it were (cf. *LL*, 171-181)—having to do with our understanding of articulation, knowledge, and reality, and (especially) the way these inform and influence one another. We began by considering the distinction Taylor makes between different forms of articulation. From there, we shifted to related issues having to do with how different accounts of articulation shape our understanding of human knowing (and, in particular, whether or not what Taylor calls “human meanings” amount to what Meek calls “contact with reality”). This in turn uncovered questions about the relationship between knowing and being, and (especially) the reciprocation between them. I will in the remainder of this essay outline one way of approaching this cluster of issues that draws on both Meek and Taylor but also in some ways departs from them.

Meek and Taylor (and Polanyi and others) concur that one very revealing way of coming at this problem involves recognizing the essential contribution embodiment makes to all knowing and being. Meek, for example, affirms the “bodily rootedness of all thought” (*CWR*, 105), and highlights the role of embodiment in Polanyi's exposition of tacit knowing (*CWR*, 35-36), its importance in our awareness and understanding of other persons (*CWR*, 105-106), and the similarities (and differences) between Polanyi's account of indwelling and Merleau-Ponty's exposition of the “lived body” (*CWR*, 205-235). Taylor likewise draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to highlight the way our “motor intentionality” enables the “gestalt perception of wholes and parts” in our environment (*LA*, 151). Embodiment, articulation, and meaning, he says, are inextricably bound up with one another; action, language, and purpose “dovetail, and complement each other” (*LA*, 43-44; cf. 161, 223-225).

One of the often unspoken but nonetheless consistent implications of this approach is that there's a distinction to be made between “the body” and “embodiment.” In other words, one thing both Meek and Taylor (and Polanyi and others) at

least indirectly suggest is that embodiment involves more than the body itself: the body is the central or principal *locus* of embodiment, but *embodiment* extends beyond the body. In addition to the disposition or action of the body itself, embodiment includes, for example (and in no particular order), the more instrumental forms of indwelling we adopt when we use tools, the more ritualized forms of indwelling we observe in our day-to-day interactions, and the more conceptual forms of indwelling we employ in our intellectual, moral, and aesthetic strivings. Just as our understanding always resists complete objectification (i.e., we know more than we can tell), so too does our embodiment elude comprehensive explication or even identification. If it makes any sense to speak of an “extended mind” (e.g., Clark and Chalmers 1998; Rowlands 2009; Rowlands 2013; et al), it is only because we have an “extended body.”

Embodiment, however, is essential for understanding not only knowing, but also being, and the possibility of accounting for embodiment in this expansive manner implies the need for an accommodating cosmology. This includes both an anthropology that resists every form of reductionism, as well as a corresponding account of the order(s) of the real to which the various dimensions or modes of human awareness, articulation, and action are attuned—or, perhaps better, *within* which they are enmeshed. In other words, attending to the importance of embodiment for apprehension and understanding leads naturally to consideration of the kind of stratified cosmology outlined by Polanyi in the latter sections of *Personal Knowledge* (see esp. *PK*, 347-405).

Meek acknowledges Polanyi’s “metaphysical doctrine of emergent levels of being,” but doesn’t seem terribly interested in it; she appreciates some aspects of it (e.g., the way it enables us to make sense of the relationship between body and mind; see *CWR*, 103-106), but also judges it to be one of the more “problematic” dimensions of Polanyi’s thought (*CWR*, 14; cf. 93-96). She recognizes some Polanyi scholars (e.g., Edward Pols) place more emphasis on Polanyi’s stratified cosmology than she is wont to do (*CWR*, 65-67), but ultimately she chooses not to employ it in any thoroughgoing manner.

Meek’s relative disregard of Polanyi’s stratified ontology is curious, not only because it seems Polanyi’s epistemology and his cosmology (inchoate though it may be) very much depend on one another, but also because just such a cosmology stands to make a significant contribution to her efforts. More specifically, it seems this vision of embodied knowers enmeshed within a hierarchically organized universe was what enabled Polanyi to mitigate the emphasis he was in *Personal Knowledge* forced to place on the role of commitment in knowing and being, and to explicate more fully the dynamics of the tacit dimension.

One potential implication of Polanyi’s vision of a hierarchically organized universe is that the notion of “contact” may actually not be the best way of describing our

experience of knowing. When we say we have made “contact,” we imply there exists a certain distance between ourselves and the objects of our awareness, an estrangement of sorts we overcome through the act of knowing. The image of embodied knowers embedded in a hierarchically organized universe, however, suggests knowing may have less to do with overcoming any presumed distance and rather more to do with the successful recognition of particular phenomena against a background of overwhelming intensity and depth. In other words, the challenge we face is not making “contact” with reality, it’s successfully disentangling the complexity of a reality that is far richer and more meaningful than we can ever know!

Even though hierarchical ontology is not an integral part of Meek’s project, she is clearly committed to an understanding of reality that affirms the real is ultimately beyond our complete understanding: her exposition of what she calls the “IFM Effect” (i.e., the “indeterminate future manifestations” successful apprehension of reality evokes) is central to her argument (see *CWR*, 77-78, 193-195). Taking her cue from D.C. Schindler’s reading of Balthasar, she suggests “the act of understanding is not unilateral but a co-act of different activities of the soul and the object in conjunction with one another” (*CWR*, 287). A particular *Gestalt* whereby we apprehend some part or aspect of the order of the real affords us a “piercing line of sight into the bottomless depths of the thing’s reality” (ibid.). Successful apprehension of the real elicits a host of unforeseen ramifications “because reality itself is pregnant with an inexhaustible fund of future prospects” (*CWR*, 293), and it is as we pursue greater understanding of these ramifications that we are led into deeper levels of participation and communion with the real.

So I find myself in agreement with many of Meek’s proposals, although it seems I’m more inclined than she is to value the potential contributions a hierarchical ontology like the one sketched above can make to a fulsome account of knowing and being. But what about the potential challenge presented by Taylor’s distinction between life meanings and human meanings? Does supplementing Meek’s argument with a bit of cosmology help address the question of whether or not the identification of human meanings is better thought of in terms of “invention” rather than “discovery”?

Another way of asking this question—one more consistent with the emphasis I have placed herein on embodied knowing and the stratified cosmology it implies—would be to inquire after the particular forms or modes of embodiment signified by each of the two kinds of meaning Taylor identifies. Do we, in other words, indwell and interiorize life meanings the same way we indwell and interiorize human meanings? Does each form of meaning signify a qualitatively distinct pattern of embodiment? Lurking behind these questions is still another: what is the nature of the correspondence between (on the one hand) physical forms of indwelling and interiorization and (on the other) conceptual ones? Is the relationship between them merely analogical, or

can we indeed conceive of embodiment as something that includes both the physical and the conceptual?

It's helpful to recall here that even those instances of embodiment we might be inclined to describe more so in physical terms nonetheless evince a conceptual aspect or dimension. The reason for this has to do with the purposeful character of every form of embodiment we adopt: we indwell and interiorize physical tools only in order to accomplish some purpose, and even if our proximate purpose is an ostensibly corporeal one there typically lies beyond it a more distal one(s) that can only be articulated in conceptual terms. Our goals and intentions, even the most quotidian, rarely present themselves in isolated or even discrete terms: we encounter them, as Taylor notes, "in interconnected skeins" (*LA*, 184). So it seems, rather than seeing conceptual forms of embodiment emerging out of physical ones, we should recognize these different forms or modes of embodiment (and thus the forms of meaning they signify) arise together.

David Kettle's (1994) use of figure-ground polarities as a way of making sense of human identity helps clarify this point. Kettle identifies three versions of figure-ground polarities: (1) spinning on an axis, (2) movement toward a horizon, and (3) floating in zero-G space. In the first instance, the (proximate) still point of the axis is the reference (i.e., the ground) we use to make sense of the (distal) movement of the environment around us (i.e., the figure). In the second instance, the (distal) still point of the horizon is the reference (i.e., the ground) we use to make sense of the (proximate) movement we experience (i.e., the figure). In the third instance, we experience a "*dual indeterminacy, out of which arise figure and ground in polar relation to one another...Figure and ground arise together, interanimating one another*" (Kettle 1994, 11; emphasis in the original). It is only this third image, Kettle suggests, that does justice to the way human beings recognize both the world as meaningful and themselves as "lively, responsive and responsible persons indwelling, participating in, creative and moral life" (Kettle 1994, 16).

Kettle's account nicely captures the image of the embodied knower for whom life meanings and human meanings arise "in relation to one another." This by no means allows us to say life meanings and human meanings are qualitatively identical or that we can collapse one into the other; rather, it reinforces an understanding of both that enables us to apply Polanyi's account of dual control to the actualization of meaning through articulation and enactment. The "marginal control" of higher-level human meanings organizes and elevates the constituent elements of the lower-level life meanings that in turn delimit the "boundary conditions" of the human meanings (cf. *M*, 49-50; *TD*, 41-45, 88; *PK*, 382). This is never only a question about the correlation of different kinds of concepts; understanding, articulation, and action, Taylor reminds us, are inextricably bound up with one another (*LA*, 43-44; cf. 161, 223-225). It is the relationship between these dimensions of our experience that constitutes our embodiment.



So strictly speaking, it's not the case that we "discover" life meanings and "invent" human meanings; rather, they inform and support one another. This is what Taylor means when he says discovery and invention "are two sides of the same coin" (*LA*, 178). What counts as a life meaning depends almost entirely on the (embodied) frame of reference that informs our sense of human meanings. Likewise, our sense of human meanings will always to some degree be circumscribed by the parameters signified by our life meanings (one might want to entertain transhumanist arguments regarding the possibility of our overcoming the current parameters of our life meanings, but I will not engage such arguments here, entertaining though they may be).

We don't, in other words, simply read off (life) meanings from a wholly independent, objective order with which we must first make contact, but neither do we simply impose (human) meanings on an otherwise incomprehensible horizon lacking any sign of purpose or significance. Rather, the apprehension and enactment of both life meanings and human meanings depends on our embodied participation in the superabundant meaning of the real. Our actions and articulations are less a matter of overcoming any presumed distance or estrangement between ourselves and reality, and more one of gathering together, out of the tremendous richness of the rational order of reality, the elements of our experience and coordinating them in a manner designed to testify, however imperfectly, to this fullness.

There are several additional issues that merit further consideration, but that I can at this point only mention in passing. Each of these issues deserves attention in and of themselves, but how we address any one of them will of necessity require attending to our assumptions about the others (i.e., the relationship or correspondence between them is itself an important question). First, the perspective outlined above is one ultimately organized, not around the body, but around the person. As important as the body is for understanding cognition, it is incapable of allowing us to say everything we need to say about human identity, understanding, and experience. Human embodiment, rather, signifies the existence of a particular form of being, one that includes both an individual dimension as well as a relational one, each supporting and sustaining the other. Polanyi's reorientation of epistemology around the image of the responsible agent is the harbinger of a similar reorientation in the area of ontology.

Second, recognition of the differences between the various modes of articulation and action available to us generates questions about the relationship between these different modes and the possibility of there being an overarching rationality evident in all of them. This is in some respects similar to the search for a "grand unified theory" in the study of physics. In classical thought, of course, the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty were thought of as ultimately being coordinated in being itself. In modern thought, truth, goodness, and beauty have not only been estranged from one another, they are sometimes thought of as having to *compete* with one another. But we

are now beginning to recognize that progress in our understanding of any one of these dimensions of reality entails progress in our understanding of all of them.

Third, the diversity of human experience and the near-infinite range of articulations and actions that follow from different ways of understanding invite reflection on the challenges of pluralism. In some respects, this is but another way of describing the possibility of our recognizing an overarching rationality evident to varying degrees in all forms of understanding, articulation, and action. Both Meek (*CWR*, 260-277) and Taylor (*LA*, 320-331; cf. Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 148-168) are sensitive to this issue. Relativism is incapable of providing any satisfactory resolution of this challenge (not least because it emphasizes the individual dimension of human identity at the expense of the relational), as are all forms of collectivism (not least because they emphasize the relational dimension of human identity at the expense of the individual). What's wanted is an account of human relations wherein unity and diversity do not compete with one another but mutually reinforce and complement one another.

Finally, the question of transcendence lies just over the horizon of all these issues. Again, both Meek (*CWR*, 278-297) and Taylor (*LA*, 76-82, 212-214, 274-280) recognize that analysis of articulation, understanding, and action naturally opens into questions about whether the natural order in some way signifies a supernatural one. Here, of course, the going can be especially rough, given the expectations and assumptions of the present age (e.g., Taylor 2007, 594-617). But (to paraphrase Augustine of Hippo) just as there is no subject that requires more diligence and no subject wherein an error can be more disastrous, so too is there no subject wherein proper understanding is more beneficial (cf. Augustine, *De trinitate* I.5). The fact all these issues almost necessarily evoke reflection on the possibility and nature of transcendent reality is itself significant, as is the fact a metaphysic organized around the concept of personal being will do a better job illuminating the nature of these issues and the correspondence between them.

I'm not sure I have proposed anything herein that is radically at odds with Meek's efforts in *CWR*. Perhaps I have done nothing more than rebalance the distribution of weight she places on the various inter-related themes at the heart of her account of realism. But my hope is this rebalancing will help further accentuate the forms of understanding, articulation, and action that provide the "epistemological therapy" we so desperately need (cf. Meek 2011, 1-30).

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