

Charles Taylor. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity.* Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2016. 368 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674660205).

Charles Taylor is now deservedly world-famous for his contributions to debates over the politics of modernity, secularism, and religion that culminated in 2007's sprawling *A Secular Age*. More recently, however, Taylor's attention has returned to some of his earliest preoccupations in ontology, philosophical anthropology, and the nature of language. Indeed, his latest effort, *The Language Animal*, reads like a prolonged set of variations on arguably Taylor's most basic philosophical theme: namely, that human beings are self-interpreting animals. Taylor made his intellectual name by the sheer ingenuity and intelligence with which he applied this central thesis of hermeneutic or interpretive philosophy to areas as diverse as the social sciences, ethics, political theory, and psychology. His most recent work follows the basic pattern of finding an area that runs afoul of interpretive insights, offering a wide-sweeping critique, and proposing an alternative approach.

The Language Animal's main target is what Taylor sees as the dominant and confused paradigm of language in analytic philosophy and linguistics departments. Taylor traces this tradition back to Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (HLC) and argues that it enjoys widespread dominion today (albeit in a much more sophisticated form) via the influence of Gottlob Frege, Donald Davidson, Robert Brandom, Ferdinand de Saussure, and others. The HLC tradition conceives of language as primarily descriptive and instrumental, as encoding reality through complex semantic constructs. By contrast, Taylor insists that such a view of linguistics makes the gross error of reducing all of language to only one of its many possible functions. For language, according to Taylor, is not 'an instrument which we can pick up or lay down' but rather 'is the medium we are in; a feature of what we are' (90). This latter claim—that language has a constitutive and not simply a descriptive relationship to large swaths of reality—Taylor associates with a rival tradition comprised of German Romantics like Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt (HHH), and later inherited by Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Taylor himself.

The central insight of the HHH tradition is that language creates and opens up new dimensions of reality: for example, new forms of ethical selfhood, sociopolitical worlds, and portrayals of artistic symbols (in poems, novels, films, music, and paintings). Thus, language is not solely about atomistic, descriptive encoding, but more broadly 'about' webs of creative meaning that shape reality. This is the sense in which Taylor is still advancing the basic claim that humans are self-interpreting animals and their actions and worlds must be grasped using a hermeneutic or interpretive approach. Human agency, because it is constituted by language, is analogous to a text and needs to be interpretively deciphered. Thus, Taylor is still battling against his ancient foe: naturalism understood as the attempt to reduce human reality to the model of the natural sciences. According to Taylor, the HLC view of language is typically naturalist because it extends the 'paradigm status of science' to domains where it does not belong (83). Encoding and atomistic description may be helpful and even necessary to scientific practice, but to reduce all language to these functions gravely distorts specif

ically human features of reality like politics, society, ethics, philosophy, religion, and the arts.

All of this presses the question: Isn't this terrain Taylor has already covered? What, if anything, is really new here? These questions are not entirely out of place. One of the weaknesses of this book compared to earlier efforts by Taylor is that it includes considerably more redundancy. This may be because (as Taylor admits in the preface) this book began as an abandoned manuscript during the 1980s and 90s. Perhaps many of Taylor's famous essays during this time period cover the same material because they were either directly derived from, or inspired by, the unfinished work of this manuscript? (Such a question will ultimately be for a biographer to figure out.)

Some redundancy aside, *The Language Animal* offers various new insights that exhibit the muscular, acrobatic, endlessly impressive faculty of thought with which Taylor has been gifted. Reading Taylor is always an education—not only because of the staggering breadth of his knowledge, but also because of how he thinks. I will briefly look at three areas in particular where I believe the book covers new ground: linguistic philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics.

First and foremost, the book is centered on a new and extended technical critique of the 'Fregean revolution' in linguistic theory, which Taylor sees as reproducing the errors of HLC (110-176). Chapters 4 and 5, in particular, reveal a side of Taylor not seen since the technical essays of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, which sought to bring down specific naturalist research programs (for example, in political science, cognitive psychology, and behaviorism) through impressively detailed immanent critiques. As part of his detailed critique of Frege, Davidson, Saussure, and Brandom, Taylor also interweaves his hallmark claim, that although supposedly descriptive, these theories are actually closely tied to normative programs that are hyper-rationalist in their hostility to religion, poetics, and metaphysical accounts of the world (121-124, 133). In other words, as with naturalism more generally, what appear to be purely explanatory and scientific theories actually turn out to be hiding an entire political and ideological underbelly.

Of course, only time will tell whether the analytic philosophers and linguists that Taylor targets will find these arguments convincing—or whether in our day of extreme academic fragmentation they will even bother to read them. But surely Taylor's efforts are enough to definitively dispel the mistaken view that his work does not address particular naturalist and reductive programs (a claim made most recently by James Wood in the pages of *The New Yorker*). In fact, accusing Taylor of not attacking particular forms of reductivism is like criticizing Beethoven for not knowing how to write a symphony.

A second area where Taylor presents novel reflections is his effort to ground his claim that humans are self-interpreting animals in some of the latest empirical findings of psychology and evolutionary biology. In particular, chapter 2 offers perhaps his most intensely focused writing on the empirical findings of psychology since his early days writing his dissertation-turned-book, *The*

Explanation of Behavior. For example, Taylor uses studies in child psychology and linguistic development to advance the thesis that language is socially holistic and never a purely private, atomistic affair (51-64). As part of this, Taylor pursues a fascinating discussion of how human intersubjective reality is actually ontogenetically prior to the formation of an individual self (64-67). These latter arguments may go a long way towards responding to critics who worry that Taylor's views on intersubjectivity stray into discredited Hegelian *Geist* or other kinds of mystification. Here, Taylor offers a plausible philosophical and empirical account of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 2 also ends with a brief set of speculations on the possible phylogenetic origins of language. These are meant to refute HLC's view that language starts out primitively as a descriptive attempt to link word and object (or perhaps the semantics of sentences and objects). The best evolutionary biology to date seems instead to indicate that the human linguistic capacity arises in inescapably holistic, narrative, and hermeneutic forms—as myth and ritual. This latter point Taylor interweaves with insights he has achieved since developing his sociology of modernity in *A Secular Age*. Will more psychologists read Taylor's radical challenge to their discipline and take the interpretive turn? Again, only time will tell.

Finally, the latter half of chapter 6 offers a deepened account of the expressive aesthetic theory that Taylor has inherited from the Romantics and Heidegger. For example, there is a fascinating discussion of the Romantic aesthetic program of the 'symbol' as non-translatable and as a move away from earlier allegorical art (234-50). In these pages, there is also an extended discussion of 'absolute music' and how this seemingly nonlinguistic form of art can also be thought of as fundamentally expressive. Through discussions of Beethoven, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, and many other artists, the overriding theme for Taylor is the way expressive art cannot be reduced to either general scientific explanations or philosophical commentary. Instead, art (like human life itself) is a continual source of deeper insight and meaning, but is never fully reducible to the inductive insights it produces. The hermeneutic 'back-and-forth' between theoretical reflection and engagement with the expressive meanings is, in principle, endless (315).

This endlessness of hermeneutic discovery is clearly on display in the energy and sprawl of Taylor's later writings. In some ways, reading the late Taylor has become like reading the late Wittgenstein: what we see on the page are actual enactments of thought, broken-up notes, digressions, and spirals of contemplation. There are dead ends and repetitions that may frustrate some readers. There are also little buried treasures, like the joke about Socrates on page 227 or the suddenly intense expressions of poetic beauty as on page 94. In some ways, this book covers every theme and topic Taylor has ever thought of before. Perhaps because of his age, Taylor almost obsessively restates the provisional nature of his own work and promises many times a companion account on Romantic poetics if only destiny allows. Regardless of if he manages it, Taylor has already given us the great gift of what seems like more than a lifetime of thought.

Jason Blakely, Pepperdine University