

Charles Taylor: *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity.* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. x, 352.)

In the first collection of his philosophical papers, published in 1985, Charles Taylor included two essays that contrasted two ways of thinking about language, meaning, and human nature. One of these approaches, which Taylor traced back to Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (HLC), takes language to be first and foremost about naming and describing independently existing objects, things like tables and trees. This ability to “designate” captures the essence of the human linguistic capacity, on the HLC view, and by exercising it judiciously humans are able to reshape the world to suit their nonlinguistic purposes. By contrast, the approach that Taylor traces back to Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt (HHH), takes language to be, at bottom, a power of bringing something about, of producing forms of human relation, human feeling, and ways of being in the world that, prior to some linguistic articulation, did not exist at all. On the HHH view, it is this ability to “constitute” meanings, to create something new and previously unknown, that gets to the heart of the human linguistic capacity. Excellence in the use of this capacity may result in accurate and instrumentally useful descriptions of external objects, in the manner of post-Galilean natural science, but it may also yield articulations that disclose the deeper, noninstrumental meaning the world holds for us, as in Romantic poetry.

This contrast between HLC and HHH also provides the cornerstone of Taylor’s latest volume. Although Taylor is more explicit and forthright in his defense of HHH than he was three decades ago, the case he makes for it, and his motivation for making it, remain essentially the same.

The case for its defense rests on two main claims: that HLC gives too narrow a view of the human linguistic capacity, so that the full shape of this capacity becomes distorted; and that the capacity HLC does focus on, the capacity for designation, is a “late arrival” that presupposes the development of these more basic capacities. The former claim involves drawing attention to the diversity of language forms, such as body language, what Taylor calls the “footings” by which human relations are established and maintained, ritual, music, narrative, metaphor, and generally what he calls “portrayals”; and showing that these are just as much instances of the linguistic capacity at work as are the making of assertions, the utterance of grammatically wellformed sentences, the formulation of literal truths, the construction of scientific theories, and so forth. The latter claim involves showing how the more intellectual uses of language emerge from and depend on what Taylor calls “enacted” meanings, meanings that are lived out and “made flesh” before they are described or put into words. Taylor seeks to make good this claim in a familiar manner, by drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. But Taylor also considers language learning in children in more detail than he has before, and the link between the phenomenology of embodiment and the HHH view of language is more developed than in previous writings.

If the case for HHH and against HLC has not fundamentally changed over the years, why does it still need to be made? The answer is again twofold. First, Taylor believes that while in its original seventeenth-century form the designative theory is long since dead, a sophisticated version of it lives on in post-Fregean (that is, contemporary analytic) philosophy of language. In particular, Taylor is convinced that a commitment to some of the basic tenets of HLC lurks beneath truth-theoretic approaches to the theory of meaning pioneered by Donald Davidson. Taylor’s engagement with Robert Brandom, perhaps the

most influential contemporary representative of the post-Fregean tradition, is one of the most interesting features of the book, though it does repeat points that have been made elsewhere, and is unlikely to convince the unpersuaded. The second reason why Taylor thinks that the HHH view of language still needs to be defended is that it is under threat not just from quarters within the academy, but from the broader cultural force of modern naturalism. Naturalism, as Taylor understands it, not only celebrates the achievements of modern natural science, but also sets this science up as the only genuine way of accessing reality. Reality is what can be designated and modern science brings the capacity for designation to maturity. A culture shaped by naturalism thus encourages us to think along the lines of HLC, and it encourages us to develop a certain linguistic capacity—at least insofar as we are interested in reality. In such a culture the HHH approach to language is bound to be on the defensive. It is worth defending, in Taylor’s view, not only because it is true, but because it invites us to explore what can be achieved through the exercise of a wider range of linguistic capacities, and in particular through articulations that seek to disclose reality in a nondesignative mode, such as narrative and metaphor. In the last section of this book Taylor examines briefly how certain modern poets and novelists have sought to do this, a task he says he will continue in a potential companion volume to this one, on poetics.

The *Language Animal* is not the giant stride that readers sympathetic to the Romanticism-inspired philosophy of language that Taylor has been advocating for decades may have hoped for. Over the 350 pages that make up the book, the case for HHH inches forward; almost, but not quite, imperceptibly