The Language Animal: A Long Trajectory

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ABSTRACT: In my paper, I set The Language Animal *against a broader picture of Charles Taylor's intellectual trajectory.* Sources of the Self *(1989) left open three major questions: (a) the viability of religious moral sources in a 'secular' age; (b) the compatibility between a robust moral realism and a genealogical account of modern identity; and (c) the meaning and destiny of the so-called 'linguistic turn.' This is the framing topic of his last book. Although Taylor's variety of hermeneutics is unquestionably a product of the linguistic turn, he has operated with a broad notion of the linguistic capacity from the start. Language is, for him, a shared activity and the acknowledgment of its animal embeddedness functions in his work as an antidote against any too idealized a view of the kind of creatures that humans are. In his earlier writings, however, a structural tension lurked below the surface between a Gadamerian notion of* Sprache *and a more phenomenological, Merleau-Pontyan, embodied outlook that was less modelled on articulate speech. My claim is that his new book marks a shift from a more speech-oriented to a more body-oriented understanding of language.*

RÉSUMÉ : Dans mon article, j'analyse The Language Animal *sur la base d'une considération plus large de la trajectoire intellectuelle de Taylor.* Les sources du moi *(1989) laissait trois grandes questions en suspens : (a) la pérennité des sources morales religieuses dans un âge «séculier»; (b) la compatibilité d'un réalisme moral robuste avec un récit généalogique de l'identité moderne; (c) le sens et le destin du soi-disant «tournant linguistique». Cette dernière question est devenue la question-clé de son plus récent livre. Bien que la variété de l'herméneutique taylorienne soit incontestablement le produit du tournant linguistique, Taylor a travaillé dès le début avec une conception large de la capacité linguistique. Le langage est pour lui une activité partagée et la reconnaissance de ses origines animales joue dans son travail un rôle d'antidote contre*

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une vue trop idéalisée du type de créature que sont les humains. Dans ses premiers écrits, cependant, se dissimulait une tension structurelle entre une notion gadamerienne de Sprache *et une perspective plus phénoménologique, liée à Merlau-Ponty et à la notion de parole incarnée, moins modelée sur la parole articulée. J'avance que ce nouveau livre de Taylor marque le passage d'une conception du language axée sur la parole à une conception davantage axée sur le corps.*

Keywords: neo-naturalism, linguistic turn, embodiment, space of reasons, eccentric positionality

1. A Book with Deep Roots

The Language Animal is a rich text, full of insightful and sometimes dazzling meditations, not just on linguistic issues but also on the human condition as such. As will be clear to those familiar with Charles Taylor's thought, it is also a multi-layered, stratified book. This is no surprise, since the volume was in preparation for decades.

If I may indulge in a personal memory, I was a doctoral student when I first heard about it. I remember the circumstance quite clearly. It was 1995, more precisely June 1995, and I was at Cerisy-la-Salle, in Normandy. As far as I know, it was the first conference ever held on Taylor's oeuvre and, during an afternoon break, I was patiently waiting in line for my turn to talk with him.[1] When it was my time to exchange a few words of circumstance, I concluded our short chat by asking him what his next project was going to be. His prompt reply was: "I am writing a book on language and post-Romantic poetics." And it was not just idle talk. A year and a half later, while I was visiting the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, I was given the minutes of a series of lectures he had delivered there a few months earlier (from January to April 1996). Reading today the almost 40 pages of dense notes is an instructive exercise. The opening lecture, for example, is a reliable summary of the new book's first chapter. More generally, Taylor's thoughts about language were scattered with anticipations of key concepts that were to re-surface in the years to come, such as the now all-too-familiar 'buffered self,' as well as perceptive remarks on the difference between symbol, allegory, and metaphor.

So much for my personal recollections. In what follows, I want to set *The Language Animal* against a broader picture of Taylor's intellectual trajectory. Together with Hartmut Rosa, Nicholas Smith, Ruth Abbey, and Arto Laitinen, I belong to the first wave of interpreters of his work.[2] If I were to indicate the common feature of our overlapping efforts with the benefit of hindsight, I think

[1] For the proceedings of the conference, see Laforest and de Lara, *Charles Taylor et l'interpretation de l'identité modern*.

[2] See Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis*; Abbey, *Charles Taylor*; Costa, *Verso un'ontologia dell'umano*; Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*; Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*.

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it is the appreciation of Taylor's unsystematic *esprit de système*. Although it may sound oxymoronic, the choice of words is deliberate. What I am drawing attention to through them is the epistemic humility underlying Taylor's synoptic ambition. To use his words, sometimes we have to "spell out the big picture" in order to pursue a modest negative goal: i.e., to avoid becoming "unconscious of our ultimate assumptions, and in the end confused about them."[3] So, to harp on an almost mandatory metaphor,[4] I still today see Taylor as a fine specimen of a hedgehog: a stubborn but non-aggressive opponent of a powerful but flawed view of human agency. His predilection for a mild synoptic view[5] ought not to be taken, then, as a precondition or an intermediate step towards saying the last word. On the contrary, it is the best way to begin a field exploration.

Thus, to come closer to the point I want to make here, if you share this kind of interest in Taylor's unusual *esprit de système*, the first thing you want to know when a new book of his comes out is what role it plays in the whole design, what hole it fills, so to speak. Now, in order to clarify this claim, let me venture an outrageously thin reconstruction of his long argument after his breakthrough book, *Sources of the Self*.

I think that this landmark work left open three major questions. The first one was the urge to show why and how God could still be a relevant moral source in a secular age.[6] In a confrontational spirit, Quentin Skinner preceded his 1994 comment on *Sources of the Self* with a quote from the historian Alexander Kinglake: "Important if true."[7] What he meant by this was that one crucial presupposition of Taylor's grand narrative—the theistic option—was simply out of the game. Taylor took seriously the challenge and embarked on a multi-year project aimed at undercutting the secularist narrative that decrees religion false simply because it is supposedly outdated, 'i.e.', superseded by the modern mind.[8] I know that the reason that this ended up being the first goal achieved

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[3] I am quoting from his "Foreword" to Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World*. See also the self-interpretation along the same line in Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p. 2: "My aim here is a modest one" (a statement that may sound incongruous when read alongside the book's title).

[4] See the Introduction to both volumes of Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 1: "Despite the appearance of variety in the papers published in this collection, they are the work of a monomaniac; or perhaps better, what Isaiah Berlin has called a hedgehog."

[5] See Taylor, "Relations between Cause and Action," p. 245: "we badly need a mild exercise in synopsis."

[6] See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 25.

[7] Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment," p. 37.

[8] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. A recent useful overview of the political motives underlying Taylor's view of secularity is Spohn, *Den säkularen Staat neu denken*.

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by Taylor is contingent (I mean 'contingent' on the invitation to deliver the Gifford Lectures in 1999), but the choice of the subject was not.

The second large philosophical issue emerging from *Sources of the Self* was an offspring of the book's original combination of moral realism and historicism. On the one hand, the genealogical approach to the question of modern identity attested to Taylor's sensitivity for the contingency and plurality in-built into the human life-form. On the other hand, however, this did not undermine Taylor's robust realist stance towards the human struggle for a truth that is not reducible to an idiosyncratic or subjective view. Hans Joas has recently coined a suitable label for this unusual stance: affirmative genealogy.[9] It took years to flesh out a philosophical position that was up to the task, but the triangulation with the two competing, yet somehow converging, views of Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell has served Taylor well in the meantime. For the "contact theory" articulated in *Retrieving Realism* is a substantial step toward a sophisticated and balanced version of the variety of (engaged) realism that was already implicit in the interpretation of the Best Account principle given in *Sources of the Self*.[10]

Now, what about *The Language Animal*? The case I want to make is that the last major issue on the table after *Sources of the Self* was precisely Taylor's assessment of the meaning and philosophical implications of the so-called 'linguistic turn.' If you look at the main trajectory of his thought, it is clear that the philosophical anthropology developed by him in several influential essays in the late 1970s acted as a bridge straddling the gap between the big book on Hegel and the even bigger book on modern moral sources.[11] It is noteworthy, then, that this creative period was crowned by two long papers on language ("Language and Human Nature" and "Theories of Meaning") that incorporated the core of the argument expanded now in the new book.[12] In the almost 40 years since then, if I am not mistaken, Taylor has returned explicitly to the issue of language only three times. (1) In a revelatory exchange with Habermas, titled "Sprache und Gesellschaft" (1986).[13] (2) In a group of interlocking essays on Herder, Wittgenstein and Heidegger written in the early 1990s, which have significant overlap with the 1996 lectures I mentioned at the outset.[14]

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9 See Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*, Chapter 4.

10 See Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 56-62; Schear, *Mind, Reason, and Being-In-The-World*.

11 See Taylor, *Hegel*, especially pp. 565-569, and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

12 Both the essays are included in Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 1*, pp. 215-292. The expression "language animal" occurs there several times (e.g., "Language and Human Nature," pp. 216 and 246; "Theories of Meaning," p. 263).

13 Taylor, "Sprache und Gesellschaft," especially pp. 50-51.

14 Taylor, "Lichtung or Lebensform," especially pp. 74-75; Taylor, "The Importance of Herder;" Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology."

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(3) And in an unexpected take on Brandom's expressivism, meaningfully called "Language, not Mysterious?" (2010).[15]

Taylor himself suggested the label "philosophical anthropology" in the introduction to his *Philosophical Papers* to pinpoint the agenda underlying his broad gamut of philosophical contributions.[16] And his readers know what this is all about. The human being, according to Taylor, is a self-interpreting animal. And this makes her (or him) a unique animal inasmuch as her mode of being is deeply shaped by her power of articulation. This human articulacy is both an active and passive condition because humans' capacity for strong evaluation is conditional on pre-articulated contexts of life (the equivalent of Hegel's objective spirit) and even people's responsibility for self—the Heidegger-indebted insight that Dasein is "ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its being, that being is *at issue* for it"[17]—is always a dialectical affair.

It was clear since the beginning that Taylor was operating with a broad notion of language. The combination of the noun 'animal' with the qualifier 'self-interpreting' was therefore not accidental, and it functioned as an antidote to any too idealized or intellectualized view of the kind of creature we humans are. In these essays, however, a structural tension lurked below the surface between a Gadamerian notion of *Sprache* and a more phenomenological, Merleau-Pontyan, embodied outlook that was less modelled on articulate speech and, I think, easier to square with the engaged realism mentioned above. Such ambivalence was inherent in the very notions of articulation and strong evaluation with which Taylor sought to overcome the representationalism of modern philosophy. For there is a sense in which articulacy and the responsiveness to a higher worth come before words.

The tension I am hinting at came to the fore with, and was made more visible by, the naturalist turn of the 1990s, when a general change of atmosphere fostered a return of emphasis on our *animal* nature at the expense of our more species-specific qualities. Now, it would be senseless to maintain that Taylor radically changed his mind in the meantime. He did not. Nonetheless, I would venture to say that his new book marks a shift from a more speech-oriented to a more body-oriented understanding of language. The impression I drew from reading the book is that the variety of sophisticated Aristotelian naturalism that was somehow implicit also in his previous writings is more prominent now. In a sense, it is a view of language hospitable to an understanding of humans as

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15 Taylor, "Language not Mysterious?"

16 Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 1: "If one had to find a name for where this agenda falls in the geography of philosophical domains, the term 'philosophical anthropology' would perhaps be best, although this term seems to make English-speaking philosophers uneasy."

17 "Dadurch ontisch ausgezeichnet, daß es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht." See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 4, p. 32.

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the kind of beings who have a 'natural' access to a boundless space of reasons, which is, though, mysterious enough to make the materialist or physicalist view of nature look inadequate as a moral source. If nature is not just matter in motion, but a catch-all concept or, better, metaphor that has to be reconciled with our basic sense of reality, then something like a Romantic view of nature is recommended.

2. Language's *Sitz im Leben*

A minded body, then. Can we go so far as to claim that this is Taylor's considered response to the challenge posed by our condition as normative animals? Is the language animal less a speaking animal than an animal endowed with a gamut of mutually sustaining embodied expressive skills? But, if this is the case, wouldn't it make sense to look for a more encompassing capability than language to capture the core of human nature? These are the questions I wish to focus on in the last section of my paper.

Now, no one can seriously doubt that verbal language (which includes arguing, writing, and reading) is an astounding human capability. And, still, to ask whether the linguistic turn in philosophy helped overestimate the impact of this ability on people's lives is becoming increasingly common among philosophers today. (The misjudgement would not be surprising, given that the people who are responsible for the overestimation are precisely those whose lives revolve around a virtuoso use of higher language skills.) However, once verbal language is seen against the wider context of the whole human-animal form of life—I mean, when language is viewed as an activity—it morphs into a distinctive way of having a common world in view, based on a more fundamental form of joint attention that looks less like a detached overseeing than a form of immediate contact.

From this point of view, what Taylor understands as language (in the constitutive sense of the word) or linguistic capacity can also be seen as a special way of coping or coming to grips with our reasons for acting or believing. What I am gesturing towards here is the peculiar condition of openness that Taylor successfully condenses in this passage: "the linguistic capacity is essentially more than an intellectual one; it is embodied: in enacted meanings, in artistic portrayals, in metaphors which draw on embodied experience, and also in the icon gestural portrayal which accompanies everyday speech, not to mention the ubiquity of 'body language' … which surrounds ordinary discourse. From another angle again, the linguistic capacity is essentially shared: it sustains a shared consciousness of the world. … This shared understanding develops a place for monological speech and writing but the option is available for us only because we are inducted into speech as conversation."[18] That said, the fact that a form of refined articulation produces impressive results both in

[18] Ibid., p. 333.

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terms of depiction (*Vorstellung*) and portrayal (*Darstellung*) says less about the beings who achieve this result than about the self-contained nature of the logical space of reasons. What is really remarkable in humans is the amount of things they are able to do together by making the most of their shared reasons.

My impression is that Taylor, with his remarkable philosophical sensitivity, has perfectly targeted the elements of the human condition supporting this insight. To begin with, there is the way children reach a point of "emotion-infused joint attention"[19] or "emotion-charged communion"[20] by establishing a special connection with their caregivers through a constellation of gestures, babbling sounds, cooing, single words, facial expressions, bodily contact, enduring or changing emotions, nudging, the shared sense of a "zone of proximal development,"[21] etc. The basic point here is sharing—being together in contact with what is 'out there' and what is 'in here'—but the long-term goal is "defining and redefining our desires and longings in order to be able to live with the pattern of fulfillments and frustrations we undergo. This turns out to be an unending human task, which in its later modes we could describe as: finding the meanings which can make sense—bearable sense—of our lives."[22]

A second crucial element is the "ladder of articulative expressions" going from the bodily enactment (1), through naming or portraying (2), to the multiple tentative explorations of the encompassing (and inexhaustible) landscape of meanings (3), and Taylor is adamant that "our ordinary grasp of a meaning draws on all three rungs. We couldn't just substitute a verbal account at rung 2 (say, a code) or rung 3 (a rationale for the code) and leave behind our embodied understanding of what it is to enact the meaning,"[23] which, by the way, doesn't have the sign-and-object structure. The close connection between the different rungs of the ladder of articulacy is further corroborated by some recent explanations of cultural evolution, in particular those relying on the mechanism of cultural neural reuse (that is, the reuse of a neural circuit for supporting a newly emerged cognitive function).[24] To learn that the brain region involved in reading (i.e., the Visual Word Form Area) "subserves other functions such as the processing of high-resolution or face recognition,"[25] for instance, should come as no surprise for a neo-Aristotelian naturalist.

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19 Ibid., p. 65.

20 Ibid., p. 231.

21 Ibid., p. 58.

22 Ibid., p. 63.

23 Ibid., p. 225.

24 On cultural evolution, see Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*; on non-evolutionary neural reuse, see Anderson, "Neural Reuse," and Colagè, "The Human Being Shaping and Transcending Itself," pp. 1008-1012.

25 Colagè, "The Human Being Shaping and Transcending Itself," p. 1010.

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So, human beings are linguistic animals but, more fundamentally, they are animals who are able to inhabit the space of reasons in a distinctive manner. In the last pages of the book, Taylor picks up the category of flexibility—"a capacity to change, even to transform" oneself,[26] which is at odds with the rigidity of instincts—to zero in on what is unique in the human-animal mind and agency. And, significantly, he finds the "theoretical language to come to grips with the evolution of flexibility"[27] in Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology, more specifically in his influential notion of "eccentric positionality."[28] This is meant to convey the idea that humans are not just open to the 'meaning' things have for them as centres of agency in their environment. They can also step back from these life-meanings and appraise them from a distance, i.e., from a different, 'metabiological,' point of view. Another kind of openness to the reasons for action animals encounter in their dealing with the world is made possible thereby. Put another way, being positionally eccentric in one's own intentional environment means to have the world in view in an exceptionally stereoscopic fashion.

Anyone who endorses Taylor's claim that there is something mysterious about our experience of the world is exercised by the question of whether, after giving up the term that dominated the epistemocentric modern philosophy (i.e., consciousness), 'language' is actually the right word to name the mode of being in the world and open to it that which is specifically human. Such a condition can be described as a way of being in touch with reality that is not the product of a titanic effort on the part of the subject, but arises from a co-operative and, to a large extent, non-goal-oriented shared activity. Herder suggested the unusual German word '*Besonnenheit*' (circumspection, judiciousness) to describe and denote this variety of intelligence that combines thinking and perception, attentiveness and tact, vision and pattern recognition. In the words of Taylor: "it is the capacity to focus on objects by recognizing them, and this creates, as it were a new space around us."[29] In this space of "clear, calm attention and of distance from the immediate instinctual significance of things,"[30] reason is spontaneously connected with emotions and the sense of a possible horizon of fullness, of a richer sense of one's own world.[31] Reason, in other words, pervades the felt insight and makes it pliable, expandable, revisable, contestable, clarifiable. The general effect, observes Taylor, is like entering a "landscape, partly hidden by fog, where some features hide others, and others again are too distant to be made out exactly. This 'landscape' implies a double

26 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 338.

27 Ibid., p. 341.

28 See Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, Chapter 7.

29 Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," p. 88.

30 Ibid.

31 See Taylor, "Heidegger, Language, and Ecology," p. 105.

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call on us: first, to live up to this sense of what is important; and second, to get it more clearly in focus. This involves changing ourselves in these two dimensions … two transformations … connected; part of the fruit of getting better is sensing better, and vice versa."[32]

'Language' is a plausible candidate to lexically designate this composite pattern of activity. But we cannot exclude that there is a better word in our dictionaries or that one may be coined for this purpose in the close or distant future. At any rate, what we are looking for is a concept that allows us to do justice to the multi-faceted image of the human condition skillfully outlined by Taylor in his last book. Humans, it seems, are animals who possess a peculiar form of stereopsis—not only perceptual but intellectual. This species-specific 'binocular' sight goes beyond the interaction of a sensory eye with the eye of reason. It also develops from multiple ways of entering the space of reasons (through emotions, storytelling, rites, action, symbolism, art, insight, conversation, regimented discourse, etc.) and the subtle play of resonance, endorsement, and recognition coming out of it. This creates the conditions for a potentially infinite realm of connectedness and commonality and a new way of *expressively* inhabiting the physical world. Plessner coined for it the term "Exzentrische Positionalität."[33] I think he came close thereby to capturing the gist of the condition of beings whom Giovanni Pico della Mirandola famously pictured in his oration "On the Dignity of Man" as *indiscretae opus imaginis*: creatures of indeterminate nature.[34]

The Eccentric Animal—this, I think, would have been another fitting title for Taylor's engaging book.

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[32] Ibid., p. 196.

[33] See Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, especially Chapter 7.4.II.

[34] Pico della Mirandola, "On the Dignity of Man," pp. 224-225.

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