Introduction to the Book Symposium on *The Language Animal* by Charles Taylor

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What it means to be a 'language animal' is a question Charles Taylor first addressed nearly 40 years ago in *Language and Human Nature*,[1] taking over the phrase from Georg Steiner.[2] The centrality of language for Taylor's thinking, and the longevity of his interest in the topic, is evident to all readers of his œuvre. Taylor's attention to the subject appears in a variety of contexts and it is possible to discern four sources for his preoccupation with language. First, there is his contestation of behaviourism in *The Explanation of Behaviour*, in which he contends that a scientific language and the attempt to explain human behaviour in terms of science cannot address the problem "that our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation.'"[3] Second, there is his interest in the Romantic period, starting with the contextualization of Hegel's oeuvre in the post-Enlightenment and Romantic eras. He describes the romantic period as, essentially, based on the new view on language[4] developed by Johann

1 Taylor, "Language and Human Nature"; the article was based on a lecture that Taylor gave 1978, see acknowledgements: Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, viiff.

2 Ibid., 217.

3 Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 3; see also Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*.

4 Taylor, *Hegel*, Chapter I, especially 11ff.

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Gottfried Herder, which makes it possible to view expression as a "realization of the self."[5] The Romantic notion of language plays a major role in Taylor's philosophy from this point onwards. Third, there is his—again early and long-term—engagement with the phenomenology of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger and, in particular, with that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[6] The way in which we speak and understand ourselves is inseparable from the perceptions we make as embodied beings and in the context of the forms of life that follow this embodied status. Fourth, there is his concern with multiculturalism and mutual understanding,[7] obviously related to his being a Canadian and Québécois and being raised with two languages. These sources help determine from where Taylor's interest in language originates. They are also worth looking at because they form continuous lines of thought, which thread their way through his writings on language. In Taylors' latest book, *The Language Animal*, they come together, intertwine and even merge to provide mutual support for the thesis he develops. They are all good reasons to take a closer look at Taylor's most recent work—and ample motivation for this book symposium. While the detailed discussion will be left to the papers included in this special issue, the following brief tour through the main themes and contexts of the book will give an orienting overview

Taylor states that his intention is to write a book on the human linguistic capacity as it emerges in writings on language by the Romantics.[8] This gives some priority to the second of the above-mentioned sources. Taylor starts with his famous distinction between the two language families, the *Hobbes-Locke-Condillac* form of theory, on the one hand, which he abbreviates 'HLC,'[9] and the *Hamann-Herder-Humboldt* form of theory, abbreviated 'HHH,' on the other.[10] He characterizes HLC as 'enframing,' by which he means that ways of life and self-understandings within these theories are independent of language. He also characterizes these language theories as 'designative' and 'instrumental.' Language functions only as a tool and meaning is created solely by designation; language is there to describe the world and that is its only function in the HLC account. The HHH-group of language theories by contrast he calls 'constitutive' and 'expressive constitutive.' Language in this account is inseparable from a way of living and self-understanding. Phrasing something contributes to creating that which is phrased. The conflicting views between these two groups of theories are mirrored in Herder's critique of Condillac's theory on the origin

5 Ibid., 15.

6 Taylor, *Ontology*; Taylor and Ayer, "Symposium: Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis."

7 Taylor, *Multiculturalism*.

8 Taylor, *The Language Animal*, ix.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 Ibid., 48.

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of language. In Herder's view, Étienne Bonnet de Condillac presupposes exactly that which he aims to explain, namely 'Besonnenheit,' the reflective ability necessary for using a language. This conflict is a telling one for his ensuing discussion of language. Taylor unfolds Herder's ideas on 'reflection' and the concept of 'intrinsic rightness' or what he calls the 'Cratylist dimension': a language animal can "grasp something *as* what it is"[11] and not only react to something in an adequate way like pre-linguistic animals. The latter can be trained, the first cannot but is the symptom of being in a different—the linguistic—dimension.

The linguistic dimension—or Herder's 'Besonnenheit'—also implies that language is *not primarily an individual capacity*: it presupposes a 'we.' Taylor unfolds this along two lines, one ontogenetic and the other phylogenetic. First, children learn a language within a community of others. Taylor argues, building on Michael Tomasello's work, that language learning takes place between elder and child through the sharing of attention and intentionality.[12] This 'we,' this being in continuous conversation, also entails that we all increasingly and implicitly develop an awareness of the perspective of our own view on the world.[13] The second line concerns the broader community of society itself. In typical Taylorian fashion, his historical view on the matter enhances his philosophical one and vice versa. In his view, the social aspect of language first takes the form of myth in narrative and ritual, with myth and ritual later being complemented by theory,[14] allowing for distance from myth and ritual and thereby new communication.

However, Taylor does not oppose HLC altogether. The concepts connected with this family of theories have valuable uses.[15] But they represent *only part* of the human linguistic capacity. Their strength lies in what these theories see as the sole or main purpose of language, i.e., the description of the world. This application is of value in scientific contexts, in legal proceedings, when logical conclusions need to be drawn, and in everyday life, when something depends on unambiguous information. But it is inappropriate for self-reflection. A view of language that reduces it solely to this descriptive function goes together with a reductive view of humans in that it overlooks the fact that humans express thoughts about themselves and about their mutual relations through language. These expressions partake in the forming of these same selves, and their relations to one another and the world. In other words, they create meaning. Taylor argues that important characteristics and shortcomings of the HLC account find their continuation in post-Fregean and analytic philosophy.[16]

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11 Ibid., 6.

12 Ibid., 56.

13 Ibid., 67.

14 Ibid., 74.

15 Ibid., 129ff.

16 Ibid., 111.

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In order to function well, descriptive theories demand normative *standards* for the use of language.[17] If language transports descriptions of the world, or the ideas the impressions of the world has generated in our minds, to another person, as opposed to contributing to the constitution of meanings, then it makes sense to ask of language that it adhere to norms since norms guarantee the exactness of these descriptions. Figurative elements accentuate the differences between the language of descriptive theories in HLC and constitutive language in HHH. While such elements violate exact descriptive communication and should, therefore, be avoided in such contexts, in constitutive language they are required and their avoidance would create a serious deficit. Over and above classic figurative elements dealt with in rhetoric, Taylor includes what he calls 'structural templates,' meaning a kind of metaphor that has its origins in our embodiment. This is another move to show why language cannot be reduced to a designative function and cannot be seen as arising as a tool for the independent capability of reflection. Not only are language and reflexivity mutually dependent, together forming the linguistic capacity, the linguistic capacity and our language games are inseparably bound up with living in the bodies we have and experiencing the three-dimensional space in which we live.

The first five chapters focus on the constitutive power of *language*, as briefly described above. In the second half of the book, the focus changes to the question of what *constitution* through language is: "The 'right word' here discloses, brings the phenomenon properly into view for the first time. Discovery and invention are two sides of the same coin; we devise an expression which allows what we are striving to encompass to appear. This is a crucial facet of our language capability, which I will call 'articulation.'"[18] There are several fields in which the constitutive power of language plays a vital role. One important field for which Taylor discusses the constitutive power of language is the *normative dimension*. Here, again, finding a more appropriate term or phrase clarifies a position or finds a new one. Over and above the fact that language cannot be reduced to this function, description also depends on uses of language that HLC does not endorse. In the same way, Taylor criticizes the Kantian view that morality can and should be "defined independently of any particular view of the good life."[19] His view is that morality depends on notions of the good life. It does so in two respects: morality cannot be defined without reference to ethical ideas and morality, as seen by Immanuel Kant and those who follow him, lacks the power to motivate. It needs moral sources, an "intrinsic appeal of a higher way of being."[20] Such a moral source can be, for instance, an idea of the 'good' or the aspiration to live a life that is acceptable

17 Ibid., 130ff.

18 Ibid., 178.

19 Ibid., 201.

20 Ibid., 210.

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to whatever God one believes in.[21] There is another way in which the field of morality and ethics exceeds the use of descriptive language. Taylor holds that human action cannot be explained only by causes, but it needs to be made sense of. We need to understand the actions and reactions of others as well as of ourselves.[22] Not only do we feel that need but these understandings form the basis for the necessary adaptability and changes of our ethical notions.

Furthermore, Taylor sees the constitutive capacity of language also in the field of '*social footings*,' our social relations. Whether two people are on equal terms or whether there is a difference in status is determined through the way in which they talk to one another. Taylor's example here is the 'avuncular' relationship in which one gives advice and the other accepts it. A different—one may say stronger—way of constituting a relationship is found in the performative power of the registrar who says "I pronounce you husband and wife."[23] Both examples can take different forms in different cultures and the relations mentioned are guided by sets of norms that are culturally determined. There are framing values that are bound up with social relations, such as, for instance, equality. These values also differ as they likewise are created and co-created with the language in which they are expressed. This means that one cannot treat them as independent objects or as 'already there.' Instead, understanding them involves understanding whole constellations of communications and practices, or "enactment[s]" as Taylor calls practices in this context.[24]

Expanding the scope, Taylor also investigates "units of discourse bigger than a sentence,"[25] namely 'stories.' According to Taylor's understanding, stories reflect language and the dichotomy of the two theory strands in a particular way. And stories offer insights in a particular way that is unavailable through science and philosophy.[26] Neither an experienced or biographical story nor a literary story can be reduced to its bottom-line, to the insight one draws out of it. The 'adages' we draw from our own stories or from stories we read are never independent of the diachronic process of the experience that has led to us gaining them. A new insight of this kind is inseparable from the backdrop of previous views tied up with the previous life. Because of the heterogeneity of the factors influencing the course of events, and because of the plurality of knowledge, motivations, and evaluations of human beings, there cannot be a simple causal account of a story. In the same way, a new insight in the field of human meanings is an insight that follows from a previous one: "it is through the story that we make sense of our lives."[27]

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21 Ibid., 213.
22 Ibid., 217.
23 Ibid., 267.
24 Ibid., 286.
25 Ibid., 291.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 317.

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A still bigger unit is a *culture*. Taylor questions whether the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which famously claims that language influences or even determines thought, is out-dated. That different linguistic structures do not correlate with different ways of perception—for instance, the quantity of colour distinctions in a language cannot be correlated to differences in colour perception—does not, for him, suffice as an argument against the thesis. There are two levels on which Taylor's view of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis does relate to cultural differences. In discussions of metaphysical topics such as time, differences in linguistic expression are related to differing cultural concepts. A notion of time as a neutral, empty, measurable medium finds its expression in a certain way of talking about time. A notion of time as inseparable from events equally finds its expression in how one speaks of it. Another realm in which the hypothesis is valid is that of "human meanings … and of footings and social structures …."[28]

The linguistic capacity means that humans are flexible in three characteristic ways. First, they can, on the basis of common instincts, which they share with (some) animals without linguistic capacity, develop particular cultural forms in which needs for food and clothing, for community, for caring for one's children, and so on are expressed. Second, they can go against these same particular cultural forms where ethics are concerned. Ethical notions are of a different type to other cultural expressions. Hearing another culture's music does not necessitate questioning one's own musical tastes. But certain more central ethical notions can and do put our own into question.[29] In the development of a universalistic ethics of human rights, for instance, this flexibility goes against the human tendency of wanting to have a cultural identity and to express it in ethical ways. Taylor points to a third flexibility, which transcends cultures as does the second but in a quite different way. In this case, this flexibility is destructive and seeks to destroy the good of the second flexibility. It has its roots in "an excitement aroused in us by the rejection of the good itself."[30] Taylor seems to indicate that the evil of this flexibility depends on hiving off culturally specific ethical notions.

This is where the book stops. Or perhaps one should say that Taylor adjourns the continuation of the book with a *cliff hanger*. He does so by taking up the role of ritual again. The ritual connects us with the whole. In modernity this is not possible in the same way that it was in earlier times. What happens now to these kinds of needs which go beyond the merely biological? Poetry, he argues with Hamann, is a kind of post-theoretical ritual, it is a "ritual of reconnection."[31] Romantic and post-Romantic poetry and poets will be the content of the '*companion study*' of *The Language Animal* to which we can look forward.

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28 Ibid., 328.

29 Ibid., 339.

30 Ibid., 341.

31 Ibid., 344.

The British social philosopher Steven Lukes says of Taylor that he has a capacious mind.[32] Taylor has certainly written a 'capacious' account of language, with lots of interconnections and traverses and with many opportunities to engage with his thought. This is what the contributors of this special issue of *Dialogue* have done, first in a workshop at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies in Erfurt on 2 June 2016. The contributors collected in this issue had the unique opportunity to engage in a discussion with the author of *The Language Animal* himself. It was also the very first round table on the book worldwide, taking place just a few weeks after publication. Concerning the order of papers now presented, we decided to start with a classification of the book, followed by general themes and questions, and then papers mainly focussing on chapters in ascending succession. *Paolo Costa*, who belongs to the 'first wave' of scholars focussing on the interpretation of Taylor's work, is very well suited to provide a discussion that contextualizes the book by setting it against the broader picture of Taylor's intellectual trajectory. *Christoph Demmerling* discusses three different aspects of Taylor's language-oriented anthropology, namely his criticism of the mediational view of language, the relation between language, and concepts and the role of emotions. *Tilo Wesche* explores the philosophy of performative speech act, which is in line with Taylor's investigation, in order to complement the 'full shape of the linguistic capacity.' A special focus in this endeavour lies on the critique of self-deception. *Nikolai Münch* discusses the criticism of an 'agential bias' directed against Taylor, among others. He argues that such a bias does not apply to Taylor's take on language by demonstrating how active and passive moments are interwoven in his notions of articulation and narration. *Markus Killius* claims that, in this new book, Taylor's struggle to theoretically frame his narration of the self—and thus his closeted Platonism—finally become obvious. He argues that we must also focus on Taylor's relation to Gottlob Frege and Wittgenstein in order to clarify both his approach to language and his approach to 'reality' as such. *Jens Beljan* focuses on the process of language acquisition in childhood, in order to make more general claims about the human condition. He suggests that the implications of Taylor's language theory are best understood when connecting the intrinsic dimensions of linguistic communication to a theory of resonance. *Gesche Keding* deals with the figurative dimension of language in Taylor's argument. She traces the difference between embodied metaphors that provide 'structural templates' and paradigms that are manifested in beliefs and practices. She argues that 'Time Is a Resource,' Taylor's example of a structural template, is actually a paradigm—and thereby criticizable—and not a structural template at all. *Marc Emmerich* correlates Taylor's opposition of HLC- and HHH-language theories to Jacques

[32] Lukes, "Ein Großer Geist." An English version is forthcoming. The title of Steven Lukes' contribution will be "A Capacious Mind."

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Rancière's distinction of 'politics' and 'police.' By discussing Taylor's example of the 'avuncular' relationship, he shows that the creative power of language could turn into a fundament of politics, but most likely does not. Finally, *Ulf Bohmann* problematizes Taylor's distinction between laws and stories, addresses his intentional blurring of stories and histories, and endorses the concept of genealogy to describe Taylors approach, as Taylor seems to hold implicitly that narrative equals history equals critique. It is to our great honour and delight that *Charles Taylor* replies to all nine papers, thereby concluding this special issue.

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