# Responses to the Symposium on *The Language Animal*

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I was very grateful for the meeting about my book at which all of the papers I'm replying to here were presented. Each offers an interesting challenge, and they have helped me define and extend my thoughts on the nature of language. I hope I can do justice to them in the following.

*Paolo Costa* has done an excellent job in laying out what I've been trying to do over the past decades. In one of my published collection of articles, I described myself in the Preface, in terms of Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction, as a hedgehog: an animal that knows one big thing, as against a fox, who knows many different things. An unkind description of the hedgehog might be monomaniac.

Living in (in some sense of 'in') the culture of Anglophone analytic philosophy, this was a very eccentric and depreciated way to be. One of the reasons for this negative appreciation is that being a hedgehog is thought to be equivalent to 'having' a 'system,' being, for example, Hegel in Berlin (except that his lecture cycles show him as more explorative than his reputation allows). I certainly don't match up to this description. Connecting all the dots between the different things I've written is more of an aspiration than an achievement. I therefore react positively to Costa's (apparently contradictory) description of me as having an 'unsystematic *esprit de système*.' Some overall thesis underlies, better, informs the impulse underlying everything I've written (and lots I still haven't), but I would be at a loss to say exactly what this thesis consists in. In other words, I'd like to grow up to be a hedgehog, but I'm aware that, at this stage in my life, I may not make it to the finish line.

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So I'm grateful to Costa for leaping ahead and giving an idea of what I'm groping towards. I think he's absolutely right to see my work as part of the (many-stranded) 'linguistic turn' of the second half of the 20th century, which englobes analytic philosophy, as well as 'post-structuralism,' as well as Heideggerian-Gadamerian ways of proceeding. I'm obviously closer to the third strand. And like the writers of this third strand, I see this focus on language as a kind of return to Aristotle, with his definition of the human as a 'Zoon echon logon.' Only following Heidegger, we must rescue this Aristotelian insight from the distortion implicit in its translation into Latin as 'animal rationale.' The right translation into English ought to be the title of my recent book, *The Language Animal*. And that immediately throws us into the issue: what is language?

The basic message of the book is that a powerful tradition from the early modern West (whose representative figures I take to be Hobbes, Locke and Condillac) has convinced many (including major thinkers in the analytic school) that language is mainly about encoding information in words, which allows us to fix our thoughts, to communicate them, and to criticize them (since verbal formulation allows us to assume a second-order stance). What I wanted to prove in my book is that, not only is language much more than this, but that it couldn't actually get to be this without being the set of dialogical, bodily, communion-seeking, expressive activities, embodied in discourse, that it also undeniably is. We become agents capable of participating in dialogical critique through first being the bodily expressive, communion-hungry infants, dialogically schooled in the various skills of our society's life form, which schooling eventuates (in some societies) in the objectifying, critical stance that produces science and its associated modes of reason. These are great, even crucial achievements, but they don't exhaust our lives as language animals, nor do they give us the full scope of reason. As Costa says, there are multiple points of entry to the 'space of reasons,' to use Wilfrid Sellars' famous phrase (in a sense perhaps broader than he intended).

To get at this, we need a concept of stance, a way of 'inhabiting *expressively* the physical world,' for which Helmuth Plessner coined the term 'Exzentrische Positionalität.' I am very grateful to Costa for helping me to get beyond some of the confusions that still beset my life as a hedgehog-in-training.

I am very grateful to *Christoph Demmerling* for the interesting questions he raises. They require very important clarifications, if they are to be answered.

First, I'd like to tackle the relations between the constitutive view of language and the anti-mediational view of knowledge. These are two theses that I hold. Are they incompatible? To answer this question, I'd like to clarify the meditational view in epistemology, which Hubert Dreyfus and I reject in our book.[1]

[1] Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*.

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The crucial feature of this view is that it takes the form of an assertion: 'ONLY through' (some meditational element) is knowledge possible. We take off from the famous statement by Descartes: I only have knowledge of things outside me through the ideas I have in me. The meditational theories all take this form, although they vary in their identification of the meditational element. It ends up with some contemporary philosophers believing something like: sentences held true.

The force of the 'ONLY here is to lead us to the conclusion that we can't get behind these elements. There's no way we can check them. Consequently, if we differ on them, the issue between us can't be resolved. To resolve it, we would have to have recourse to further meditational elements underlying these, which furnish reasons for accepting them. But then these new, more fundamental elements would become the basic mediations we can't get behind.

On page 58 of *Retrieving Realism*, we quote the Davidson-Rorty view: "Nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and language so as to find some test other than coherence."[2] A perfect statement of the meditational view, but the claim is in fact incorrect. As agents-in-the-world, we can form beliefs about the things that surround us, and we can challenge these by forming new ones, something we illustrate by the story about 'Johnny' in the following pages. The basic elements in linguistically formulated arguments are beliefs, but we have ways of getting behind them and changing them, so an 'ONLY through' thesis here is false.

Thus linguistically formulated arguments are in one clear sense mediated through language. But that doesn't mean that you can't get behind our formulated beliefs. The relations of language and experience can also be illustrated by the components of truth and exaggeration in the Sapir-Whorf thesis. Unexciting variants, which have been much derided by mainstream theorists of language, point to different words for colours between different languages. These are unexciting because research has shown that people can recognize distinctions between colours that are not marked in their language, if their attention is drawn to them. But when we come to moral qualities and institutions that are embedded in a culture, the fact that there is no word in modern English that exactly translates Aristotle's 'Kallos' becomes more serious. You can't just explain what this word means by pointing to something your interlocutor can see, but hasn't noticed. He will have to become familiar with an alien culture. This is possible, but the gap is much greater. The term 'incommensurability' really has a sense here.

When it comes to concepts, Demmerling has me right. I think that the term 'concept' has two very different uses, applied, for instance, to animals or humans, or to our 'macho' biker before or after he learns to use the word.

[2] Ibid., 58.

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The basic Herderian thesis of language as constitutive is that being able to name something means that you have a 'besonnen' awareness of that thing. When I say, for instance, 'the last tweet of Trump is a flat-out lie,' I am making the attribution in a field of possible questions and challenges. I know that someone might say: 'Poor Donald, he doesn't know the difference, and certainly not what he's talking about.' If 'lie' means 'consciously stated untruth, uttered with intent to deceive,' then he's too befuddled and narcissistic to meet the criterion. Here we are debating around a *besonnen* concept, which we can do because we have language. But there are plainly analogues to *besonnen* concepts that animals have, or in some cases unsophisticated humans have. We could call these "proto"-concept, as Dreyfus and I did in our book.[3] Or, if this sounds belittling about animals, we might speak of *unbesonnen* concepts. The mouse has such a concept of a cat, and knows how best to escape if when it appears; and the dog has one such of the squirrel, and knows how to go after it. I think Demmerling is operating with some such distinction is his discussion. But I interpret Heidegger's 'as'-structure as another way of putting the Herder thesis. This doesn't mean, however, that *unbesonnen* concepts can't be highly sophisticated and incorporate complex distinctions. Plainly, they do with higher animals.

Regarding emotions, I agree with Demmerling: it is good to start with a concept of 'meaning' that points to the significance things can have for us, the way they concern us. 'Meanings' in this sense can be noticed without being felt. I note that it would be dangerous to walk a tight-rope between two skyscrapers, but I have no intention of doing this; whereas, when I meet a tiger in the jungle, I perceive the danger with considerable fear. But there is also an issue about the role our descriptive language can play. As I argued in Chapter 6 of *The Language Animal*, some basic distinctions—like that between pride and shame, for example—we learn very early as the names for feeling we are beginning to have, or can easily recognize in others. This follows the ordinary, designative semantic logic: we notice a phenomenon and are told its name (or we give it a name). But when we look at the scenario Demmerling presents in the beginning of his part (2) on this issue: I feel indignation when I look at the rich and beautiful, but then come to the unsettling realization that a big part of my hostility reflects envy; here there is another semantic logic. The realization actually alters the experience. The semantic logic is what I call the 'constitutive' one.

Thanks again to Demmerling for his penetrating questions. I hope my answers clarify things at least to some extent.

I understand very well the great importance of the issue *Tilo Wesche* raises in his paper: dialogue, critique, communicative exchange are crucial to human rationality, as well as to reaching agreement. But both these goals can be

[3] Ibid., 78.

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blocked when interlocutors fall prey to trivial, prejudiced, and biased convictions, which they can't see beyond. Wesche holds, if I understand him correctly, that there is a way of performing our communicative acts of critique that can somehow circumvent, or break through, these blockages. I must confess that I never quite grasped how this kind of break-through can be effected. Wesche's argument lacks perhaps examples—except towards the end where he invoked the famous dialogue between interrogator and prisoner, Robert Mohr and Sophie Scholl, in Stadelheim Prison 1943.

I understand the force of this example. When, despairing of throwing the interrogator off the scent, and thereby escaping death, Scholl finally begins to speak in a new register, giving her real, deeply felt view about the crimes of the Nazi regime, it becomes clear to Mohr that he is now facing someone whose deeply felt convictions put his whole career into question. He can't just look at what she's saying as the evasive half-truths of a prisoner trying to ward off a terrible fate. She is not speaking strategically anymore, but directly putting forward her deepest moral convictions. This poses a challenge to Mohr that he has never met, and didn't expect to meet, and he is forced to talk as a human being who can defend his actions. This is an excellent example of how the actual speech acts in which a communication is made can help to break down the resistances the addressee would normally have to its message. But I don't quite see how one can move from this example to a more general characterization of performative speech acts that break down barriers in this way.

Maybe that's not what Wesche meant to do, but the preceding pages seem to be offering some such general theory. I have probably not properly understood the thrust of this paper, for which I apologize.

I fully concur with *Nikolai Münch*, both in recognizing that there is an important 'patiential' dimension to human life, and that, once you see the importance of articulation to a full human life, this dimension of what happens to you can't be ignored. I agree heartily with all of this, and I would like to embroider further by referring to contemporary debates about the nature of Critical Theory.

There are strands in modern thinking and sensibility that accentuate the importance of *Selbsttätigkeit*, and perhaps these are particularly evident on the political Left. These are being presently challenged, particularly by Hartmut Rosa on the basis of his resonance theory.[4] The assumptions of Critical Theory have often been that what is wrong about present capitalist societies can be summed up in two big categories: exploitation of non-élites, and their disempowerment. But in fact a really good society needs something more than equality, and an absence of exploitation/deprivation of some by others. Of course, it most emphatically requires these. But it also needs a widespread capacity to see what human life means to others. Think of the way that some of our essential

[4] Rosa, *Resonanz*.

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social institutions, of health care, education, social work, can fail in their purpose, even inflict harm, through a lack of attention or even comprehension of the real felt needs of those in their care, or perhaps also of those administering the care. They can become ossified by bureaucratic rules and regulations that fail to help, or even harm their supposed beneficiaries. Or, from the positive side, think of what an inspiration it can be to come across some really imaginative and innovative hospital ward, or school, where this kind of openness and attention is present, and people can communicate their needs.

What both these experiences show is the importance of the ability/desire to reach beyond one's comfort zone, or zone of familiarity, to be open to lives and experiences outside these. And, of course, when we come to societies that are in fact multi-cultural, whatever the policies adopted, the need for this kind of openness is even more evident, particularly if our society contains strong reactions, and even movements that are militating for exclusion, and strong political movements are tempted to ride to power on such reactions.

We are carried here beyond agency. My agency may be involved if I decide that I want to become more open, and set out to educate myself; but the actual condition of openness is a capacity to discern and be touched by the previously unfamiliar. It involves letting yourself be reached, be acted on, by the lives of others. Of course, to repeat, I can set out to receive training in becoming this kind of person, but the achieved state is in the domain of 'passion' rather than action, a matter of *pathein*, rather than *prattein*.

How do people become capable or incapable of this kind of openness? Well, one way of increasing it could be to inaugurate programmes to educate people in openness (here the activist speaks again). But in fact how open people become in their lives is the result of a host of different life experiences. We are all born and brought up narrow to some degree—that is, we are all short of ideal openness; or even of the kind of openness we need to make a success of today's democratic societies in the present conditions of global migration. But, however brought up, we can all have experiences: meeting someone, responding to acts of exclusion, and so on, that make us more open. And there can be negative experiences that push us in the other direction. Jihadis and Islamophobes are in a stance of objective collusion to maximize the negative ones.

But however we and our societies evolve in this regard, what we need here is not primarily a condition of *agency*; however we might act to enhance it, it is in the dimension of receptivity, the capacity to experience. It is a condition of what we might call 'patiency'; except that the concept 'patient' has already been invested with too many meanings to avoid misunderstandings. But, philosophically, we must draw the conclusion that the over-focus of critical theories on the health and pathologies of agency (a) is unjustified, and (b) may contribute to a blindness to the importance of 'patiency.'

A programme of Left reform that is blind to this need for the dimension of openness is prone to reproduce some of the worst aspects of present society, and perhaps add some bad features of its own. I am glad that Münch's paper

has opened up this whole dimension, on which much more needs to be said. Among other areas, crucial issues in political theory are at stake here.

I regret that I couldn't really grasp the central argument in *Markus Killius'* paper. I also couldn't recognize any argument I have put forward. I think we may be talking at cross-purposes. An expression like "[t]he context that makes a word true (or false) is the *guaranteed presupposition in the context of its proposition*, its guaranteed representation of an existing reality of which something can be predicated" (last paragraph, Section 2) strengthens my sense that we are on to different questions. Talking about a word as "true" raises an interesting set of philosophical issues. But I was interested in truth attributed to assertions, which taps in to rather different issues. And how do you get a "guaranteed presupposition"? Somehow I am supposed to get something like this through 'constitutive goods.'

But maybe we are on the track of a misunderstanding. There is something, yes, Platonic in my concept of 'constitutive goods.' Plato's Idea of the Good is an obvious example. But my aim in *Sources of the Self* was not to identify which are the really, founded, guaranteed-to-be-valid constitutive goods. Ask me in another 100 years (if you can find me), and I may have an answer to this.

My point was something about what you might call the 'form' or 'internal relations' of a description of the self. The first important step in my argument about this asserted that what we might call our 'identity' in the Eriksonian sense makes essential reference to one or some important qualitative distinctions, what people often call 'values.' The second link I wanted to establish was between these valuations and whatever it is about God/the cosmos/the universe/human beings that essentially underpins one's valuations. This is what I call the 'constitutive good'; and for Platonists it is the Idea of the Good, as mentioned above; for theists, the will of God; for atheistic Kantians, the essential dignity (*Würde*) of human beings. Even those whose highest aspiration is to instrumental rationality and/or other forms of cleverness (self-styled experts in the 'art of the deal') base themselves on the existence of this capacity in (at least some) human beings. And, in the nature of things, they find these goods inspiring, and so contemplating them empowers us to do (what we call) 'good.' My claim was that these links are built in to the structure of our identities. But I wasn't pleading for any particular constitutive good. Now, in some cases, the constitutive good is also what gives reality its shape. This is true for Platonists, and for believers in a Creator God. So for these people their constitutive good also can be said to be what makes true propositions true. But this is hardly the case for everyone, and certainly not for practitioners of the art of the deal.

What was I trying to achieve in delineating the links that help define identity? This structure of links helps one to tell a story of how our understanding of self has evolved over (Western) history; and that was my goal in writing *Sources*.

*Jens Beljan* has summed up my negative theses, what I'm fighting against in our theory of language in his terse enumeration of the 'misconceived seven.' These form a set of theses that I believe we have to struggle against if we want to avoid distorting our understanding of language. These theses mainly spring from a too narrow grasp of language: focussed on information coding and the communication we need to conduct much of our business as mature adults.

Beljan brings out the crucial point that language as the site of communion is not only what it's all about in our infancy, and the games that our caretakers play with us around dolls, teddies, joint attention to dogs, cats, and little siblings matter too. It also remains a crucial feature of our lives throughout. Later we develop elaborate distinctions of intimacy versus distance, which are ritually sustained, and sometimes deepened, in language in the broadest sense. Much which is crucial to our lives, including many forms of resonance, are encompassed in and through language. Even our more impersonal social relations are created and sustained through interpersonal discourse (a point I discuss at length in Chapter 7).

Regarding Jean Piaget, whom Beljan invokes, there is an important overlap between his notion of overcoming egocentrism and what I argue in Chapter 2. In fact, I think the term 'egocentrism' doesn't quite fit what Piaget is trying to say in describing this transition. What is important is the step from living simply in 'our' world, or 'the' world, to a more sophisticated understanding of our differences of perspective, interest, goals, etc. Beljan is right: this is not simply a cognitive advance; it is also a fuller opening to the other, the door to a deeper intimacy, if that is what we seek, a being-with-others on a deeper, more satisfying level.

But why 'egoism' seems to me the wrong word, is that prior to the transition what the child is still caught in is not her own perspective; it is a world where perspectives are not yet distinguished or attributed. But making the transition is as much an emotional as a cognitive step.

*Gesche Keding*'s paper raises the most interesting questions about our relations to time. First of all, I want to say that I accept her notion that certain of the 'structural templates' that form our experience are so deeply embedded in our way of being and living, that we are only with difficulty aware of them as such. An example of this is the way that we use the notion of 'balance' to speak of a balanced personality, a balanced budget, balance in a painting, and so on. All these find their roots in our experience as embodied beings, manoeuvring in a field of gravity, where we could 'lose our balance.'

There is an analogy between this kind of template, and what Thomas Kuhn spoke of as 'paradigms,' structuring assumptions about what we need to look for in a given area in order to advance our scientific knowledge. But there is also, as Keding argues, an important difference between these two kinds of case. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine our coming to find the term 'balance,' in all its many uses, either incomprehensible, or even unhelpful.

Kuhn's point in introducing the term 'paradigm', by contrast, was that, in the history of science, we see case after case in which an existing paradigm was upset, and scientific advance was only achieved by challenging it and casting it aside. Pre-Galilean mechanics took the Aristotelian principle for granted that there was no movement without a continuing mover. This was not only from piety for the great ancients, but seemed rooted in experience. If you want to move your wagon, you have to keep pushing (or have your donkey pull it). The break-through came with the notion of inertia. Both the usefulness of 'balance,' and the principle—no movement without (continuing) mover—seemed rooted in everyday experience, but the latter turned out to be something we can (and must) liberate ourselves from.

The template that Keding discusses partakes of both these models. 'Time Is a Resource' involves our looking at time in a historically new way. Earlier ways of living time blocked it as a systematic way of dealing with time; and even when we shift, questions arise about how much this way of looking at it, and dealing with it, distorts our life in time, even imposes an inhuman way of living.

Let's look at what blocked this way of dealing with time in earlier ages. First, our earlier understanding of time was like our pre-Newtonian idea of space. This was really a notion of 'place' (topos, locus). What we would now think of as a given volume of space was identified with what filled it. The step to 'space' was a step to abstraction: the given volume is identified by its abstract co-ordinates in a universal system. Something similar was true of time. When Hamlet says: "The time is out of joint / O cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5), he speaks of what is filling his time in rotten Denmark. The same can be said of Machiavelli's use of 'I tempi.' He is speaking of the concrete goings on in his age.

Our modern consciousness supposes this abstracting move. You have to think of some area as empty space if you want to plan how to store things in some warehouse; and similarly, with time, when you want full freedom to deploy different activities in some abstractly conceived period. But we can imagine that something more than this pre-abstract consciousness played a role. In an epoch that recognized higher times along with, and interpenetrating our profane time of one event after another, some times would have seemed intrinsically to demand a certain way of being and acting. As Hamlet and his companion, waiting on the battlements for the ghost, affirm about Christmas (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4). We needed the fading of a sense of higher times to be able to look on time as a resource.

This is not to say that people weren't tempted to, for instance, work on the Sabbath, and didn't have to be controlled by the authorities. We know that they did. But it is one thing to be tempted to cut corners, and another to have a systematic understanding of time as abstract, and therefore open to all-embracing reorganization. From the Reformation on, we begin to see this slow transformation in time consciousness taking place. There looks to be a parallel

between the Galilean-Newtonian understanding of abstract space-time, and the shift to seeing time as a resource, and indeed, there is some mutual causal interlacing of these two processes. But there is also an important disanalogy, because important questions arise about lived time, and what forms of it are liveable humanly, and what forms distort our lives to an unbearable degree.

What we experience when we hear music that moves us, or follow a meaningful story, or see some tract of our lives as living such a meaningful story, or being part of a ritual—the list could go on—cannot at the same moment be lived as abstract time. Rather, it is lived as time that is 'claimed' by a meaningful chain: of events, notes, episodes, transformations. The more that 'rationally' re-organized time sequences invade our lives, the more such 'claimed' times are bound to be compressed, even squeezed out. Rosa has shown the extent to which the tendency to acceleration in contemporary industrial-technical society (whether impelled by capitalism or 'socialism') is making life less and less liveable.[5]

What we urgently need is some deeper understanding of the shapes of lived time that we cannot allow to be sidelined or repressed. Walter Benjamin is one of the sources we need to search in; and he found resources in the poetry of Baudelaire, which is one of the places I want to examine in my next book. Thanks again to Keding for raising crucial issues that need much more working out.

Thanks to *Marc Emmerich* for his interesting paper on Jacques Rancière. I am less familiar with Rancière's work than I would like to be, and this paper helped me to get a better grip on his approach.

I think his police/politics distinction comes close to a distinction I make in my book between the way we constitute (and thus often alter) our social relations by introducing and spreading new understandings of social roles and their relations, on one hand (police), and the way discourse (not just classificatory language, but actual speech to and before others) can entrench or alter these relations (politics). Of course, these two processes are totally intertwined. So the development of new political orders from the 18th century on, in which the concept of 'citizen' was a key element, proceeded through the spreading of a new authoritative vocabulary, such as rights-talk, and through new acts of discourse by subalterns, addressed to power-wielders.

The events of the French revolutionary decade 1789-1799 offer an illustration of this. The 'police' of the ancien régime, like any others, was complex. It recognized, as it were, certain canonical forms of disruption to this order. Such were, for instance, the *jacquerie* (among peasants), and the urban uprising. In the latter, when conditions became intolerable, when, for instance, the price of wheat rose sky-high, and various merchants were hoarding stocks to send it

[5] Rosa, *Social Acceleration*.

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even higher, the people could take things into their own hands, seize stocks of food, burn down, sometimes kill the hoarder (accapareur), challenge the royal intendant. These uprisings were invariably repressed, but they often triggered action by the government to ensure that prices went down. But one thing that was off the radar of the insurgents was any challenge to royal power itself.

One of the hinge moments of the Revolution was the taking of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. This had a lot of the features of the traditional uprising, including some rather grisly ritual violence in the killing of the governor of the building. But, in the new context, this act underwent—not immediately, but over time—a fateful makeover. It would be henceforth understood in the new terms, in which a people asserts its sovereignty against an ancien régime that had no place for it. The new terms sprang from the new context of the States-General that itself wanted to burst out of its traditional form.

We can see this interplay between acts of discourse and the ongoing received terms of social life. As Emmerich says, the 'avuncular' relation is certainly not a challenging one, but the example I raise in the book is the evolution of modes of address in the late 20th century, whereby the relation between 'familiar' and 'formal' modes of address (tu/vous, du/Sie) was challenged and transformed in an egalitarian direction.[6] This came about through myriad acts of discourse, in which the social limits of the old were tested and then pushed into a new mould. I experienced this in my own society (Quebec), and have been astonished at the speed and irreversibility of the process.

I appreciate Emmerich's remarks about the place of Romantic self-expression in this social evolution of the last two centuries. I am trying now to explore this in some of its aspects.

I read *Ulf Bohmann*'s paper with great interest. I can see right away that a lot more needs to be said to make clear what I am arguing here. So let me try to clarify the picture I'm trying to draw.

First about the distinction I draw between stories and supposedly timeless truths, by which I mean truths thought to hold for all times. No one could deny the presence and sufficiency of the latter in natural science: the inverse square law is a good example. It doesn't admit of correction through narrative and it doesn't need such correction or confirmation either.

But it's a mistake to seek this kind of self-sufficient law in human sciences. So runs my thesis. Now at one point, Bohmann seems to hold that I'm dealing with a straw man: no one does anything so foolish. Alas! I wish this were true. I spent years in a political science department, in which certain scholars in comparative politics or international relations were motivated by precisely such an ambition. Maybe my outlook has been formed by this (negative) experience. But the phenomenon undoubtedly exists. It is part of the widespread

[6] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 271.

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range of attempts in human science to approach the certainties of natural science, by using its methods.

But to say that this goal is illusory is not to say that there is no role for generalizations in our social science, for instance. Indeed, fruitful thinking in this area involves tacking back and forth between generalizations and narratives.

Let's look at an example. Many of us in contemporary Western democracies, reeling from the recent successes of right-wing 'populism,' are struggling to understand the phenomenon. Noting the analogies between different such movements—Trump in the USA, the Front National in France, Brexit in the UK, the AfD in Germany, etc.—we hazard a guess at the common factors. What looks like such a factor is populations that have experienced a worsening of their plight in the processes of globalization and technological change, and who feel that their plight and their needs have been neglected by 'liberal élites.' Such attempts at generalization are perfectly legitimate and, indeed, indispensable. But such generalizations never grow up to become established laws, like their cousins in natural science. Why not? Because we're dealing with human science that is inextricably 'hermeneutic,' to use the standard word here. By this, I mean that our account of what happens involves our interpretation of the meaning of human actions for the agents. Such interpretation is a potentially endless process, that is, we can never arrive at a final point where no further correction or improvement is needed—as we have, for instance, with the inverse square law.

So we tack back and forth between generalizations and histories. We look in detail at the process leading up to the 2016 election in the USA, at the progress and then frustration of Mme LePen, and so on. These studies force us to modify the simple generalization and, what is more important, to supplement it: because the kinds of aspirations, resentments, and hatreds that power populist movements, for all their similarity, exhibit subtle differences in the way they work out in each society (and even within societies: the kind of sense of being abandoned that won Trump Wisconsin, for instance, was different from the indignation of poor whites in the South). This doesn't mean that generalizations don't help. They are an essential part of the process, even though they can never suffice as its end point.

The potential endlessness of hermeneutical argument is one of my firmest theoretical commitments. But this doesn't put me in the camp of Hayden White and Richard Rorty (well, the case of White is more complicated, but there is clear difference with Rorty, much as I appreciated his work). There is no impasse in the argument here. One can point out that certain phenomena that figure in the story have not really been addressed by the interpretation of the opponent. François Furet pointed out that the Terror cannot really be explained by the external menace to the Revolution posed by the invasion of the coalition, plus the revolt in the Vendée.[7] Not only do the dates not line up, but the

[7] Furet, *La Révolution Française*.

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whole dramatic language of corruption and purification through which the Terror was justified cries out for explanation, and isn't even addressed in the standard Marxist account. This kind of challenge is one the opponent must (try to) meet. We don't just arrive at an impasse, shrug our shoulders, and each go our own way. The argument goes on, correcting errors, short-cuts, blind spots. It's just that we never come to a point where we can rule out such a future correcting move.

So Bohmann has got me entirely right, when he says I'm doing genealogy. These are narratives about the origins of something X that alter our understanding of X. But that doesn't mean they invariably debunk X. They always refute something, but it may as easily be the negation of X. Nietzsche's genealogy of morals is a case where he debunks what he explains. I don't buy this particular account, but I do agree that narrative is indispensable.

I am very grateful to Bohmann for raising a number of interesting points, that enable me (I hope) to clarify certain points in my book.

I hope I have contributed to clarifying some of the difficult and important issues raised in these papers. I think some progress has been made in these exchanges, even though there can never be a final word on these matters.

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