

Narrative, History, Critique

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ABSTRACT: In Chapter 8 of *The Language Animal*, Charles Taylor claims that narratives are unsubstitutable for an appropriate understanding of social life and ‘human affairs’ in general. In order to identify open questions in his argumentation as well as unwanted consequences of his outlook, I proceed in three consecutive steps. I first problematize Taylor’s distinction between laws and stories, then go on to address his intentional blurring of stories and histories, and finally suggest that the concept of genealogy might be a promising candidate for describing Taylor’s approach, concluding that he implicitly forms the equation: narrative equals history equals critique.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans le huitième chapitre de *The Language Animal*, Charles Taylor affirme que les narrations ne peuvent se substituer à une compréhension adéquate de la vie sociale et «affaires humaines» en général. Afin d’isoler quelques-unes des questions laissées en suspens dans son argumentation et les conséquences non intentionnelles de son approche, je procéderai en trois étapes successives. Premièrement, je questionnerai la distinction qu’il établit entre lois et récits; deuxièmement, j’aborderai le flou intentionnel qu’il maintient entre récits et histoires; enfin, je suggérerai que le concept de généalogie pourrait s’avérer approprié pour décrire l’approche de Taylor. Je conclurai en avançant qu’il formule implicitement une équation : la narration équivaut à l’histoire qui, à son tour, équivaut à la critique.

Keywords: Charles Taylor, literature, history, critique, genealogy, narrative, enlightenment, romanticism

Introduction

It is simply inconceivable that Charles Taylor could write a book on language without emphatically addressing the narrative dimension. First and foremost, his approach rests principally and all too thoroughly on adopting the practice

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of narration when it comes to making his key arguments, as can be seen in his magna opera, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. Or, to put it another way, if Taylor has a signature move, it is the telling of a story, the historical account of ‘how it all came about,’ in order both to show the emergence of a certain predicament and to convince his addressees of his specific approach and stance (as on modernity or secularism).¹ Almost equally important, throughout the broad scope of his oeuvre, Taylor repeatedly and insistently employs claims about the inalienability of the narrative dimension for philosophy when dealing with social life. Now, in *The Language Animal* he aims at making those features explicit on a very general level—at showing “How Narrative Makes Meaning,” the title he gives to his Chapter 8.² He thus enlarges the scope of the enquiry by looking “at units of discourse bigger than the sentence” and by exploring “what larger texts can show us about language and its powers,”³ an approach that has not been necessary up to this point in his book. Taylor’s central (and quite bold) claim is that stories are not only one way among others to give us an understanding of social life and the whole gamut of ‘human affairs’ (such as causes, values, habits, motivations, identities, life courses, etc.), but that narrative is essentially *unsubstitutable* for this endeavour: Valid insights cannot be gained by trying to do without stories or by converting them into timeless generalizations.⁴ While I am, by and large, convinced by Taylor’s account, I want to shed light on a small number of selected points and draw attention to a difficulty in the argumentation, to a consequence thereof that the author may not like in the end, and to a suggestion of how to understand (and perhaps sharpen) his specific grasp. In this short assessment of Taylor’s latest examination of narrative, I shall proceed in these three consecutive steps by problematizing his *distinction of laws and stories* (I), by addressing the range of the *blurring of histories and stories* (II), and by briefly suggesting that his approach amounts to a particular form of *critical genealogy* (III).

I. Laws and Stories

Taylor’s claim may look rather modest at first glance: “A novel, as a work of art, doesn’t assert anything about life. It is made up of assertions, but these are about the world of the novel”; thus, it provides a “nonassertive portrayal of human life, of its choices, issues, travails, fulfillments; and this can open new horizons for the reader.”⁵ While this seems quite harmless, Taylor’s goal here is not primarily to provide a cogent analysis of the narrative features of language. Rather, he situates himself within a theoretical dispute and defends his position against a presumably

¹ For a similar assessment, see MacIntyre, “Charles Taylor und das dramatische Narrativ.”

² Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 291-319.

³ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

dominant outlook in modern social science and philosophy. He does so by challenging the general “suspicion of narrative, which is strong in our philosophical culture.”⁶ He traces this suspicion back to the Humean belief that causal attributions depend on general rules, “a powerful prejudice of modern natural science-influenced culture”⁷ that also applies to “much contemporary (analytic) philosophical thought.”⁸ This resting, Taylor concedes, may well be perfectly sufficient for natural science but is plainly wrong when dealing with human affairs.⁹ In the latter domain, stories are not an expedient extra that can simply be stripped away to uncover the actual rules in social life but, rather, are a constitutive feature of the respective epistemology. This holds both for the (more or less factual) stories we tell ourselves as individuals or as a society, as well as the (fictional) stories we find in the realm of literature. So, when we seek to gain insights about ‘human affairs’—from social change to biographical transitions—we need narratives, consisting mainly of the two elements of ‘episode’ (diachronic unfolding) and ‘background’ (providing overall sense and meaning, explaining the impact of the episode).¹⁰ Taylor’s main focus lies here on magnificent pieces of literature, from which he takes the bulk of his examples (such as, to name but two beautiful specimens, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Devils*). Taylor’s thoroughly romantic conviction is: we must *re-live* those stories in order to properly or even fully understand the intentions, emotions, values or inner conflicts of the portrayed characters.¹¹ The experience we might acquire from this is constitutively framed in a narrative form, as it is

inextricably diachronic: deeply colored by the sense I might have that the movement from earlier to later amounted to some gain in comprehension—or perhaps loss, or was just in the end a step sideways. This reading can be upset by later experience, or reflection (as Mann hints in the case of Hans Castorp), and my conclusion may be altered. But what I conclude at the moment is shaped by this experience.¹²

⁶ Ibid., 299.

⁷ Ibid., 316.

⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁹ Ibid., 316. This argumentation is consistent with Taylor’s older concept of the ‘best account principle’: In order to ‘make sense’ of our lives, we cannot rely on scientific generalizations and abstain from articulating the best possible expressive story about ourselves. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 302.

¹¹ On this narrative and romantic quality, which is closely tied to relived experience in reading stories or history, see Jäger, “This Detail, this History.” He writes: “Taylor’s method is ‘literary’ not simply because it is committed to both the first and the third person. ... When Taylor says that he has a story to tell, he means that his account must be undergone, not simply paraphrased or glossed.” (Ibid., 173.)

¹² Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 308.

So the fallacy is clear: We must not detach the conclusion from a diachronic story.¹³ This applies both to literature, where any moral will be incomprehensible without telling the story, and to real life, when we tell ourselves what biographical choices we have made or how our social behaviour is to be accounted for.

Now, when it comes to any kind of causal explanation, the *opponent* becomes quite clear: The attempt to *translate a story into a timeless truth or law* about human life.¹⁴ And we may well be convinced by Taylor's general argument. However, at least three interrelated problems or open questions remain.

(1) While Taylor may be completely right in asserting that a story, about, say, a choice I made as to how to lead my life, can convey a perfectly good explanation for why I did what I did, being both emotionally comprehensible and rationally intelligible, he may in the end bark up the wrong tree when it comes to the actual opponent: *are there really any laws* regarding social life in the social sciences, humanities, philosophy? Frankly, I can't think of any convincing examples. There are, of course, empirical probabilities, well-established hypotheses, and statistical generalizations but that is the point Taylor himself makes against laws (and rightly so).¹⁵ Taylor's point is an epistemological one—we should not try to derive laws from narratives by detaching a timeless conclusion from the diachronic story—yet the argument in this form does not touch the existence of laws in social life. So, in the end, the fiercest opponent, against whom Taylor scores some good hits, might be nothing more than a strawman.

(2) Even if we assume that there actually are laws in the human affairs, the crucial question remains: how exactly can we make a distinction between a law and a narrative? This question is not raised directly in the text, perhaps because it seems so intuitively evident. One might presume that laws and narratives are structured completely differently—either compelling, clear, and ordered, or somehow arbitrary, unsystematic, and open to interpretation. Yet, this is not Taylor's argument. Rather, he gives us two reasons that narratives are superior to laws: they “bring together a heterogeneous bundle of factors”¹⁶ and different kinds of causal links, as opposed to the illusion of a single coherent direct conclusion; and, even more importantly, they enable us to come to a nuanced “overall judgment,” as opposed to the propensity of a context-free

¹³ This is expressed several times in Chapter 8 of *The Language Animal*: 298f., 308ff., 312, 316.

¹⁴ Long version goes as follows: “neither can the causal attributions of history be collapsed into some nomological account by a covering law; nor can the whole range of insights of the best fiction, whether into the causes of action and the gamut of possibilities of aspiration and action, be summed up in some other medium, extracted from the diachronic medium of the story and distilled in timeless assertions about human life.” (*ibid.*, 299.)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

proposition.¹⁷ Still, we may infer that those two advantages essentially involve the feature of ordering. Thus, concerning the distinction, an educated guess might be that it lies in the *way or degree of ordering* provided by either laws or narratives—not if ordering takes place, but maybe how one-dimensionally, strictly and unequivocally it is done. This remains an open question in the text.

(3) To go one small step further (and beyond Taylor): It might be scientifically unsatisfying but plausible for us to assume that, in most cases, when we try to examine a single event, transition, etc., in social life, there can *never* be a *truly* proper judgement, there can never be a *fully* cogent explanation—even if we follow Taylor in employing narrative as a means of providing such things. There is a whole gamut, or even endless list, of factors relevant to the human affairs and many or most of these factors are likely to be opaque and unintelligible to us. This is especially true—and Taylor clandestinely shifts the focus within this chapter of *The Language Animal*—when it comes to history.

II. Histories and Stories

As the comprehensibility of transitions is a—if not the—crucial feature of narrative, a very close connection to history is all too obvious.¹⁸ It is thus not surprising that narrative historical accounts are essential tools for Taylor, both in theory¹⁹ and in practice,²⁰ and are explicitly classified that way in his self-reflections.²¹ The shift within the argumentation of *The Language Animal* from typical narrative towards historical accounts is correspondingly smooth. Interpreting Taylor, we might conceive of this pervasive narrative as a progression of sophistication in steps, from events with minimal human action up to complex history. To illustrate this in a longer quote:

[W]e have a crucial feature of stories, that they bring together a heterogeneous bundle of factors: different kinds of events and states, and causal links. And in the

¹⁷ Ibid., 294.

¹⁸ See Pinkard, “Taylor, ‘History’”; Blakely, “How Charles Taylor Philosophizes with History.”

¹⁹ For Taylor’s theoretical arguments on reasoning through (historical) transitions, see, for instance, Taylor, “Explanation and Practical Reason”; Taylor, “Philosophy and its History.”

²⁰ Especially in his magna opera *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. On that point, Taylor is most explicit in the latter one: “But why tell a story? Why not just extract the analytical contrast, state what things were like then, and how they are now, and let the linking narrative go? Who needs all this detail, all this history? (Ibid., 28.) He continues: “In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got here. ... This is why the narrative is not an optional extra. ... I believe that I have to tell a story here.” (Ibid., 29.)

²¹ Bohmann and Montero, “History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy,” 3.

human case, this is so in spades. A story, whether fictional or historical, will also involve human motivations, actions, interactions, differences of character, longer-term conditions, things good and bad that happen to people—in short, the vicissitudes of fortune, mutual sympathy, antipathy, and a whole gamut of attitudes to others. And more.

A history which tries to explain, say, the outbreak of the First World War, or the French Revolution, or the condition of contemporary Western democracy, will draw together all of the above, with particular emphasis on long-term conditions, economic and demographic trends, cultural differences, *mentalités*, which will have to be integrated with the shorter-term events, and interactions and mutual attitudes among the actors involved in the change.²²

What might be inferred is that there is a fluid passage from simple stories to complex histories without categorically changing the features of narrative. What thus becomes visible is a *blurring of the distinction of 'story' and 'history'* and, again, Taylor's argument seems compelling when taken as a whole (although, to be sure, the open questions of the section above also apply here). For instance, when it comes to history, the anti-detachment principle explicitly still holds. It would be a grave fallacy to assume that we can forget about all earlier worldviews, and that new conclusions can be detached from the preceding history.²³ According to Taylor, this is the classic mistake of the “shallower strands of the Enlightenment.”²⁴ Encapsulated in this brief remark is nothing less than the *resurfacing of a defining rivalry* in Taylor's historic-philosophical approach. First and foremost, his *Sources of the Self* speaks volumes about his diagnosis of the deeply rooted conflict between the two moral sources of modernity: *Enlightenment and Romanticism*. The ‘naturalism’ of Enlightenment may thus be correlated with the aforementioned law-abiding post-Humean anti-narrativists; the romantic ‘expressivism’ on the other hand not only corresponds to the requirement to relive a story, but is even more closely tied to Taylor's preeminent demand in his oeuvre for (individual and collective) *articulation* of our (strong) evaluations.²⁵ This demand both applies to our personal identities and to our social lives in political communities, and seeks to revive our moral sources through making us recall what really matters to us (note that this is a thoroughly narrative-based concept, too). Once again, and thus also in the realm of the philosophy of language, Taylor's characteristic Romanticism prevails.

²² Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 295.

²³ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; for an assessment and differentiation of Taylor's concept of Enlightenment, see Bohmann, “Der ambivalente Aufklärungs- und Rationalitätsbegriff von Taylor und Foucault.”

²⁵ The well-known notion of “strong evaluations” is succinctly developed in Taylor, “What is Human Agency.”

The blurring of stories and histories raises yet another bundle of questions and leads to implied consequences. I will deal with two interconnected issues.

(1) What is the relationship between historical narrative and *truth*? As indicated above, trying to translate a story into a *timeless* truth is a major fallacy for Taylor. Now, timelessness and a decidedly historical approach taken seriously are mutually exclusive. However, there might be, interpreting Taylor, something like a continually evolving provisional truth in our self-understanding and social lives. Regarding history, he claims elsewhere that “we understand what we now see as a truth as a result of an error-correction in relation to an earlier view ... this idea is what I would call a ‘transitional understanding.’ ... I’m understanding myself in opposition to a supposed past. There is an inescapable narrative dimension to this.”²⁶ Still, this aforementioned provisional truth does not fully account for the precise way in which a historical narrative is ‘true.’ When it comes to our self-understanding, a (hi)story might be true *subjectively* if it properly captures our ‘real’ motivations, etc.; yet, it might also be true *objectively* if it correctly captures ‘how it really was.’ In *The Language Animal*, Taylor distinguishes between fictional *or* historical, fictional *or* factual,²⁷ but in the overall claim about narrative there is no strict categorical difference as, in both cases, the same logic, the same features apply. “There is some analogy between writing history and writing a novel. However, this doesn’t mean that we’re doing something different from trying to adjudicate truth”; in histories, “a lot of things open up and you can see causal dependency that you didn’t see before, which you can track and thus get closer to the truth.”²⁸ Thus, a more detailed history (e.g., on the French Revolution, to use Taylor’s example) is actually superior. Still, here we deal with provisional truths that are very much open to interpretation and depend on their plausibility for us and their impact on our lives. Both fictional and factual (hi)stories entail a creative and constitutive power,²⁹ as they open up “new categories to understand life, a new sense of human possibility.”³⁰ Yet, if historical fact and fiction have more or less the same features, and both are essentially about new possibilities through new creative descriptions, Taylor would be much closer to his esteemed long-term adversaries Hayden White (on history)³¹ and Richard Rorty (on philosophy),³² the former being more radical on the non-neutral and literature-related employment of any history, the latter being more radical in his consequential claim to refrain from philosophy and to practice literature with an actual

²⁶ Bohmann and Montero, “History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy,” 3.

²⁷ See Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 295, 298, 299, 317.

²⁸ Bohmann and Montero, “History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy,” 7.

²⁹ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 317.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

³¹ See, e.g., White, *Metahistory*.

³² See, e.g., Rorty, *Truth and Progress*; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.

impact instead. Both thinkers are appreciated by Taylor. However, in his view, a clear opposition to their thoroughly relativistic positions remains. But does it really? In the end, all three of them might buy into a concept like the Thomas Theorem after all: the truth lies in the ‘true effects’ in real life, no matter how fictional a narrative is.

(2) Now, if (narrative) truth is provisional even in history and always a question of never-ending hermeneutics (which might be the case), the role of *rhetoric*—of convincing an audience—*trumps futile attempts to prove or verify* in a strict sense. Again, Taylor’s refutation of natural science laws in human affairs comes to mind. Certainly, he makes sure that “a novel, as a work of art, doesn’t assert anything about life.” But he continues: “Nevertheless there emerges what I called a nonassertive portrayal of life.”³³ Again, with a glance towards François Furet, who “challenged the mainstream historiography of the French Revolution (often influenced by Marxism),” Taylor states that it is wrong to assume that the “new conclusions can be ‘detached’ from the history which preceded them.”³⁴ But what makes a (hi)story actually cogent? Taylor does not provide us with many criteria here; a historical-hermeneutical stance seems to be the crucial point for him. In *The Language Animal*, Taylor only reminds us that in (hi)stories of transitions, our prior understanding must be treated fairly, as it would be shallow to offer “only a caricatural picture of ... earlier outlooks,”³⁵ and that a more detailed history is (usually?) superior.³⁶ But it is overall a question of hermeneutics; so what, if anything, may be said about a boundary or at least gradual steps to differentiate ‘true’ (hi)stories and ‘mere’ rhetoric? If there isn’t any, it comes down to the superior “convincing power”³⁷ of any narrative.

So the question rather is not (again with some parallels to White): ‘what is the true (hi)story, freed from all partiality, emplotment and rhetorical tricks?,’ but rather: ‘*which kind of story is told, which style of rhetoric is used?*’ In Taylor’s outlook, there is not an explicit assessment of the use and abuse of a rhetorical dimension, and it would not be easy to give a generally appropriate and satisfying answer anyway. However, for Taylor, there are definitely (hi)stories that are in their content and/or in their form *either good or bad*. In the field of social and political philosophy, Taylor frequently criticizes what he evaluates as pretentious accounts of ‘pure reason,’ as typically found in (neo-)Kantian outlooks and their “single principle doctrine.”³⁸ Usually, those accounts entail

³³ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 299.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 316.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See, again, Jäger on the specifically romantic quality of this aspect, which is not coincidentally eponymous for his article “This Detail, this History.”

³⁷ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 312.

³⁸ Bohmann and Montero, “History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy,” 10.

universal arguments about reason and morality that are, by definition, ahistorical. But even if they entertain historical accounts—such as an Enlightenment-driven passage from ‘darkness’ to ‘light’—they seem to be a case of misguided and illusive (hi)stories. As he writes elsewhere:

But like any mirage, it can look very solid from the distance It lives more by the suggestive force of narratives ... which have been spun around its three key motifs: (1) Cartesian foundationalism and its attendant rationalism, (2) the coming of post-Galilean science, and (3) the Grotian reconstruction of social theory And then the narrative locks in, which can carry us to the delicious illusions of a self-sufficient reason (*blosse Vernunft*).³⁹

Thus, even rather sophisticated (hi)stories can not only criticize and debunk illusions but can produce comforting self-delusions—which makes it an open struggle of opposing stories.

In his *A Secular Age*, he is quite forthright in stating that he “will be making a continuing polemic against what I call ‘subtraction stories.’ Concisely put, I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.” He continues: “And just because we describe where we are in relating the journey, we can misdescribe it grievously by misidentifying the itinerary. This is what ‘subtraction’ accounts of modernity have in fact done. To get straight where we are, we have to go back and tell the story properly.”⁴⁰ This means at least three things: first, as mentioned before, the richer, more detailed account is superior for Taylor, independent of any other features; second, a narrative is not only an exercise in ordering, but also an argument in itself, as Meili Steele rightly points out;⁴¹ and third, there are not only old and new (hi)stories but contemporary accounts that are *struggling for (political) predominance*—which brings us back to the diverging convincing power of narratives, and the key criterion of *impact*, as purported by Rorty. Do we thus have to recognize that most of the socially relevant histories today are, in the end, just political interventions?

III. Critical Genealogy

(Hi)storytelling is one of the most important tools throughout Taylor’s magnificent oeuvre. As a conclusion, I would like to suggest that there is a *likely candidate to sum up* Taylor’s decidedly historical approach as a critical intervention

³⁹ Taylor, “Die Blosse Vernunft,” 346.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22 and 29.

⁴¹ Steele, “Ricoeur versus Taylor on Language and Narrative.”

into contemporary moral, social, and political life by using a narrative form: the concept of ‘genealogy.’⁴²

This labelling is not an altogether self-evident interpretation, as the term is closely associated with an infamous philosopher. Besides White and Rorty, who are from Taylor’s perspective philosophically rather ‘disagreeable secret allies,’ a new interlocutor enters the stage: *Friedrich Nietzsche*.⁴³ Nietzsche’s genealogical approach to the dark origins of our morality is similar in the focus on transitions and their critical impact, yet more intentionally destructive than Taylor’s ambivalent aim of simultaneously undermining certain contemporary normative conditions (such as ‘shallow’ Enlightenment naturalism) while reaffirming other sources of morality (such as expressive Romanticism). Taylor himself writes:

When Nietzsche wants to launch his out and out attack on morality, he does this by offering an account of the transition to it, the rise of slave morality. ‘Genealogy’ is the name for this kind of probing. No one can fail to recognize that, if true, Nietzsche’s genealogies are devastating. That is because genealogy goes to the heart of the logic of practical reasoning.⁴⁴

Such a genealogy is critical in at least two ways: first, it challenges contemporary conditions by showing or implying their flaws; and second, it is not only critical in its intentions but, interestingly, also in its very (narrative-like) form. Taylor gives us a brief description of what is the formal quintessence of social critique in his perspective and it is all about *transitions*: “Effective critique has to identify what you can build on in the present situation, and what needs to be overcome. ... It’s really of how you get from here to there.”⁴⁵ While not explicitly mentioned, both features are compatible with Taylor’s assessment of narrative in *The Language Animal*, and the second characteristic in particular is very close to the descriptions and arguments used in Chapter 8.

A critical genealogy thus describes transitions but does not have the power to prove anything—it must convince, just as does any narrative. That applies to Taylor’s approach, as well as to the ‘classic’ genealogies,

⁴² For a more detailed development of this argument, see Bohmann, “Charles Taylors Mentalitätsgeschichte als kritische Genealogie.”

⁴³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche is only briefly mentioned in this chapter of *The Language Animal* (305 and 310), but frequently throughout the grand historical narratives of *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 72f. It is no coincidence that Taylor mentions his ‘best account principle’ and the close kinship of practical reasoning and (biographical) narrative on the very same page before the quote.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

yet with *different emphases*: while Nietzsche's rhetoric is forceful, exaggerated, and polemical, looking for the 'better' story, the (as Taylor would say) 'neo-Nietzschean' Michel Foucault,⁴⁶ who is almost equally famous regarding critical genealogies, works with more historical sophistication and erudition, providing him with the strategic advantage of not being all too easily disproven or marked as 'not true.' Taylor deploys a similar form, albeit with a different aim: to recover the value of morality in an affirmative way, not to undermine it. As has already been acknowledged by interpreters such as Ruth Abbey: "In this regard, his genealogy of morals differs markedly from that of Nietzsche."⁴⁷ Yet fruitful connections have been noted several times. Possibly the first scholar to note possible connections regarding genealogy was Michael Shapiro, who suggests: "It would therefore behoove Taylor to stop looking over his shoulder at Nietzsche and consider the gains for his kind of hermeneutic analysis that could result from a critical confrontation with the genealogical perspective."⁴⁸ While being rather sceptical for some time, Taylor himself seems increasingly willing to accept the label. When asked if he makes use of a critical genealogy, he approves: "I agree. It can be a very powerful form of critique, and it can have an affirmative side as well. I don't take genealogy as necessarily always debunking, although it very often has such debunking elements. So the question we might ask is: 'is it always worth it?' And I think that it's always worth it."⁴⁹ He also concurs that he makes use of genealogical elements in his quarrel with 'subtraction stories,' as he is not simply claiming that they are wrong but trying to show it through a counter-history of the emergence of contemporary secularity.⁵⁰ Taylor does not explicitly discuss his rather obvious genealogical ambitions when it comes to the narrative dimension in *The Language Animal*. Still, this seems to be the appropriate way to describe his take on the amalgamation of narrative and history with critical intentions. As a final conclusion, one might even venture one step further. In Taylor's genealogical approach, we can assume the following equation: narrative equals history equals critique.

⁴⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault was a real-life interlocutor of Taylor; they met at Berkeley in 1983, one year before Foucault's untimely death. Interestingly, in this context, Taylor criticizes Foucault in his most explicit assessment for a flawed concept of truth (due to a strong relativism) and a lack of ambivalence in his overly dark historical accounts of our modern condition. See Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth."

⁴⁷ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 51.

⁴⁸ Shapiro, "Charles Taylor's Moral Subject," 322.

⁴⁹ Bohmann and Montero, "History, Critique, Social Change and Democracy," 8.

⁵⁰ See *ibid.*

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