Language and the As-Structure of Experience
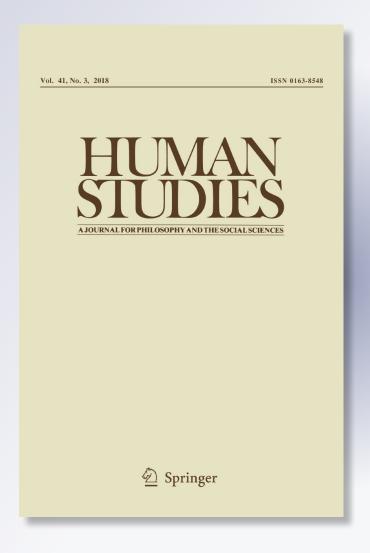
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BOOK REVIEW

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Language and the As-Structure of Experience

Charles Taylor: The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016, x + 345 pp + index, $35.00

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> *"Where word breaks off no thing may be."*—Stefan George, "The Word," quoted in Martin Heidegger, On the Way to Language.

In recent years a number of excellent books have appeared devoted to the phenomenology of language (Inkpin 2016; Taylor 2016; Hatab 2017)—that is, to the *experience* of language and how this experience shapes one's experience of oneself and of the world. Here we focus on Charles Taylor's (2016) book, *The Language Animal*, which for us points to the most radical implications, but at the same time falls short of fully developing them.

At the heart of Taylor's contribution is his explication of two meta-theories of language, two semantic logics—the *designative* and the *constitutive*. Although Taylor presents a rather detailed account of the evolution of these two viewpoints,[1] we will restrict our comments here to what we regard as their most important originators and developers—Descartes in the case of the designative and Heidegger in the case of the constitutive.

The designative viewpoint follows directly from Descartes's metaphysical dualism and the representational epistemology that derives from it. The mind (*res cogitans*) is ontologically isolated from the external world (*res extensa*) and makes contact with it by creating ideas that represent independent objects therein. In this view, words acquire meaning by being attached to the ideas that represent objects within this self-standing external reality. Such designative logic provides the scaffolding for Galilean scientific method.

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[1] The contributions of Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac to the designative viewpoint and of Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt to the constitutive perspective.

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In the designative perspective the fully formed idea precedes its naming. In the constitutive viewpoint, by contrast, language transforms and introduces new meanings into the world of our involvements. Language co-creates the things it names by allowing them to show up in experience *as* something. When Heidegger claimed famously, "Language is the house of Being" (1998 [1946]: 239), he was pointing to how language enables entities to be intelligible to us *as* the entities they are. From the constitutive perspective language is inherently interpretive, not merely descriptive.

Much of *The Language Animal* is devoted to fleshing out the characteristics of the constitutive theory. In the constitutive view, language transforms the world of our involvements by introducing a new manner of disclosing—i.e., new meanings, which can be spoken or enacted. As Taylor claims pithily, "humans as self-interpreting animals are partly constituted by their own self-descriptions" (p. 41). Language, in this view, brings about "a regestalting of our world and its possibilities" (p. 46), thereby opening up new ways of being. In contrast with the monological quality of designative logic, constitutive logic emphasizes how language creates contexts for intersubjective relatedness—for joint engagement in the world and for communion with others. As Hatab aptly claims, "language is at the heart of human dwelling" (2017: 118).

Taylor does not present a detailed account of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, but his explication of constitutive theory presupposes much of it. Indeed, in our view it is Heidegger (1962 [1927]) who captures the phenomenology of constitutive logic and its relationship to Being. For Heidegger, the Being of an entity is its intelligibility *as* the entity it is. The process through which the intelligibility of entities is constituted Heidegger calls *the clearing*. It is no accident that Taylor repeats the word *as* multiple times in explicating the constitutive view of language since, as a framework of intelligibility, language is essentially an *as-structure*. The clearing of Being ("intelligibility as") is accomplished by language. "Language is the house of Being. In its home human beings dwell" (Heidegger 1998 [1946]: 239).

It is clear from his rich fleshing-out of the constitutive theory that Taylor favors it over the designative theory, which, he argues, entails an "ontologizing" of Galilean scientific method and the elevation of the one language game (Wittgenstein 1953) into a paradigm for all. Surprisingly, however, Taylor concedes that we use language designatively to "inform ourselves about the world of self-standing objects" (p. 332). We turn to Wittgenstein to help us further radicalize Taylor's position.

Wittgenstein is ordinarily not characterized as a phenomenologist, but we find his account of how language bewitches one's intelligence to be a singular achievement in the phenomenology of language. In section 426 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously claims that the meaning of a word is to be found in the "actual use" of it, and he contrasts this understanding with the projection of a picture:

> A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*. The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddied.

…. [T]he form of expression we use seems to have been designed for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees the whole of each of those infinite series and he sees into human consciousness. (Wittgenstein 1953, section 426)

Wittgenstein is claiming here that when one projects a picture as the meaning of a word, it gives one the illusion of a God's-eye view of the word's referent as a thing-in-itself—what Taylor characterizes as a self-standing reality—an illusory clarity that one much prefers over the "muddied" view given in the understanding that the actual meaning of a word is to be found in its multiple and shifting contexts of use. When the illusory picture is then imagined as ultimately real, the word has become transformed into a metaphysical entity. In place of the "muddied" view given by contexts of use—finite, contingent, unstable, transient—one can imagine the clear outlines of an everlasting entity. Metaphysical illusion, mediated by reified pictures, replaces the finitude and transience of existence with a God's-eye view of an irreducibly absolute and eternally changeless reality. A bewitchment of intelligence by the constitutive power of language is thereby accomplished!

The as-structure provided by language, even in the sciences, is always constitutive of experience and never merely designative. "From Saying…it comes to pass that the World is made to appear" (Heidegger 1971 [1957]: 101). Scien*tism*, as opposed to science, is a philosophical doctrine claiming that the methodology of the natural sciences is the only valid pathway to knowledge and truth. The contemporary reign of scientism is safeguarded by designative and constitutive logic working cooperatively together. The constitutive power of scientific language bewitches intelligence by picturing irreducible metaphysical entities, as described by Wittgenstein. Such illusory entities then become subject to the principles of designative logic. If language is the house of Being through its constitutive power, designative theory unchallenged is its prison. The distinction elucidated by Taylor between constitutive and designative logics points the way toward liberation.

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