BOOK REVIEWS

Taylor, Charles. *The Language Animal: the Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-674-66020-5. 352 + xii. $35.

The "basic thesis" of Charles Taylor's *Language Animal* is that understanding language requires accounting for "its constitutive role in human life" (261). Taylor contrasts his use of the term "constitutive" to another way of understanding language he describes as "designative-instrumental." This latter account defines language chiefly in terms of encoding and representation; the former, however, describes language as the means whereby we are able to avail ourselves of forms of awareness and experience we would otherwise not have. Language, in other words, does not merely represent reality: rather, the use of language contributes to the unfolding or development of reality.

Taylor identifies two philosophical traditions with each of these views of language: the "designative" he associates with Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Étienne Condillac (i.e., the "HLC" tradition), and the "constitutive" he associates with Johann Hamann, Johann Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (i.e., the "HHH" tradition). The HLC tradition developed in the shadow of

the "representational epistemology" of Descartes (4-5); in modern times, the HLC tradition is represented by theories that suggest our use of language can be "easily transposed into the stimulus-response connections of classical behaviorism" (14). The HHH tradition, on the other hand, arises out German Romanticism, and is more recently represented by Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although Taylor often refers to both traditions throughout *Language Animal*, they are not the focus of this work; he plans to develop a more fulsome account of both traditions in a forthcoming companion study on "writers of the Romantic period" and ways some of them rehabilitated premodern accounts of the world as a "locus of signs" (326; cf. 343-345).

The first chapter is dedicated to identifying the principal differences between "designative" (HLC) and "constitutive" (HHH) accounts of language. The former takes a much narrower view of what counts as language, whereas the latter adopts a more expansive or "holistic" perspective (17-18). The former tends to focus on discrete, punctual instances of articulation, whereas the latter affirms the inherent "temporality" of all language (21-22). The former is concerned chiefly with identifying how language maps

an *a priori*, independent reality, but the latter suggests language opens up new horizons of meaning and awareness that involve us in new existential concerns (28-35) and "lay out new topographies" (41). The former depends on more or less "monological" accounts of thought and articulation, whereas the latter assumes a more "dialogical" account of both (48-50).

Having thus established the parameters of his investigation, Taylor next turns to an examination of the "ontogenesis" of language; he recognizes the need to provide an account of the emergence of language in individuals, in cultures, and in the evolutionary history of the species, but is also clear any such account will be more than a little speculative (51-52). Relative to individuals, Taylor follows Michael Tomasello's suggestion language emerges from "protoconversations" that involve shared attention or "referential triangles" between children and parents (53-57). Relative to cultures, he suggests languages emerge alongside expectations about behaviors, social roles, forms of propriety, and standards of reasonableness in given communities (63-65). Relative to the evolutionary history of the species, he borrows from Merlin Donald's analysis of the relationship between mimesis, ritual, myth, and theory (68-75; cf. 274-269, 337), and also explores the cultural transformations that resulted from the destabilization of premodern accounts of cosmic order and the accession of (modern) standards of meaning and value that seek no justification outside themselves (79-81).

The next two chapters are dedicated to critical analysis of the HLC tradition and its assumptions. Taylor distinguishes between biological or "life meanings" and "metabiological" or "human meanings," examples of which include aesthetic values, moral and ethical standards, and acts of altruism (88-91). He notes the reductionistic tendency of some in the HLC tradition to collapse the latter into the former, but concludes such efforts are misguided: strictly designative accounts of language may help explain "life meanings," but are less useful for making sense of "human meanings." Much of the attraction of the reductionistic, "resolutive-compositive" logic of the HLC tradition follows from its perceived alignment with both modern natural science as well as modern notions of authority, freedom, and political order (108-109). The work of Gottlob Frege rendered many of the conclusions of the HLC tradition "quaint and unsophisticated to an almost unbelievable degree" (111), but the HLC tradition continues to exert no small influence on analytic philosophy (112-117, 122-124).

Taylor's efforts are not merely critical and so he devotes most of the rest of the book to unpacking his various constructive proposals. The three themes he highlights are "disclosive metaphor, the lived body, and the ineliminability of (human) meanings" (161), none of which the HLC can fully accommodate. The first of these refers to ways we deploy language to open up hitherto unavailable forms of attention, awareness, and understanding (134-137); the metaphorical character

of language necessarily involves a degree of indeterminacy and flexibility when it comes to meaning (140-141, 147-148). Taylor draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty as well as more recent efforts by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to demonstrate how different "sensorimotor schemata" disclose different horizons of meaning (149-160). Ultimately, Taylor says, attempts to delimit the range of language to terms the HLC tradition is willing to accredit "must founder" because we simply cannot express everything "we want to say about ethics, aesthetics, human character, history, politics, and so on," in such narrow terms (172).

One question Taylor engages repeatedly in the latter half of the book has to do with how we ought to think about the relationship between continuity and change in linguistic traditions (187-193). Both life meanings and human meanings are subject to modification, but the question is especially pressing relative to the latter: how do we know we're "getting it righter" (197), especially when it comes to forms of articulation that seek "internal," self-authenticating justification as opposed to "external," referential justification (197-198)? Taylor examines the way moral reasoning and ethical standards undergo change as a paradigmatic case study of this challenge (200-230). Such changes come about through reconfigurations of the "dimensions of constitutive enactment" that support traditions of human meaning (237).

Another issue he considers has to do with the necessarily multimodal character of language. Some forms of articulation

(e.g., visual arts, music, etc.) cannot be transposed or translated to other media, and thus portray meanings that resist articulation in any terms other than those in which they're originally expressed (238-249). Once we grasp the hermeneutic character of constitutive forms of articulation, there can be no question either of delimiting our understanding of language to a single mode or form or recognizing the interdependence of various modes or forms (260).

The last few chapters are dedicated to exploring the relational character of language. Over and against the more individualistic, "monological" account of language advanced by the HLC tradition, Taylor advances the more social, "dialogical" approach favored by the HHH tradition (264-268). Drawing on his earlier work in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, he outlines ways forms of articulation enact the histories, traditions, values, and goals of particular cultures (273-285). The relational character of language is further manifest in the influence narrative and context play in determining the meaning of terms and phrases, and vice versa (291-298): this leads to an examination of the correspondence between narrative and identity and the way enacting stories enable us to "*become* a self" (318).

Finally, Taylor turns to a brief consideration of linguistic relativity (i.e., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Relative to life meanings and certain aspects of articulation (e.g., tense, some forms of perception, etc.), he suggests hypotheses regarding the incommensurability of worldviews signified by different languages can be

overstated. Relative, however, to human meanings and the kinds of "metaphysical" realities that require articulation in order to be actualized, he is more willing to give credence to linguistic relativity. In other words, "designative" articulations are not subject to such relativity, but "constitutive" ones may well be (327-328). This kind of variance need not result in "moral uncertainty and 'relativity'," but rather directs us towards the hard but unavoidable work of careful listening and dialogue (328). Taylor concludes with a brief chapter that draws together the major themes of the book and outlines how these themes will inform the forthcoming companion study of Romantic accounts of language.

There are many points of contact between Taylor's analysis and Polanyi's account of language and meaning: both repeatedly emphasize the continuity and the distinction between life meanings and human meanings, the overlap between embodiment (action), cognition, and articulation, and the way forms of articulation subject to self-authenticating rules of rightness open up new horizons of awareness and meaning. It seems, too, Polanyi would agree with Taylor about the reality and the challenge of linguistic relativity (as well as the extent to which linguistic relativity need not lead to metaphysical or moral relativity). Here as elsewhere, Taylor provides more solid and philosophically sophisticated versions of ideas and arguments Polanyi advanced but was not able to elaborate to the same degree.

Andrew Grosso
atgrosso@icloud.com

Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. 342. ISBN-13:978-0-226-23195-2. $44.72 hb.

Building on his book, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (U of Chicago Press, 2010), Christian Smith in *To Flourish or Destruct* carries forward and fleshes out an ambitious, comprehensive project of reforming contemporary sociology and related disciplines in the social sciences. His target audience is professionals within these fields, though he also seeks to engage professionals outside these disciplinary boundaries. Smith writes as a seasoned, classically grounded philosopher and sociologist, remarkably free of ideological bias, forthrightly acknowledging the fallibility of his own thinking, and commanding an impressive grasp of the vast body of recognized scholarship in sociology as well as the history of reflection on human nature. He seeks to restore to the center of the social sciences a humanistically robust, critical realist conception of what it means to be a human being—specifically, a *person*. This entails displacing five dominant, but in Smith's account seriously problematic, models of human being that are to be found in sociological literature. The view Smith represents he identifies with the intellectual tradition of personalism, though he seeks to re-establish personalism on a firmer foundation

conversant with insights from the natural and social sciences, and refashion it so as to incorporate a coherent, normative account of human interest, motivation and action that is grounded in the nature of reality and teleologically oriented toward realizing what is good for humans as such (an account self-consciously akin to that of Aristotle).

Smith's project leads him to take up and challenge a host of problematic legacies of the Modern European Enlightenment that have distorted and disabled sociological attempts to understand, explain, and significantly ameliorate the human condition of persons in modern society: ontological anti-realism (including constructivism), epistemological foundationalism, judgmental relativism, positivist empiricism, hermeneutical interpretivism, postmodern deconstructionism, objectivism (along with the idea that being objective requires moral neutrality), the fact-value dichotomy, reductionisms of various sorts, causal determinism, and the sociological antinomy between the individual and society (manifest among other places in liberalism/individualism versus collectivism/holism). In each case Smith carefully explains how the problematic conceptions in question fail to grasp and take into account the complex nature of human persons and how a personalist understanding can resolve or dissolve the problem. Key ideas here are Smith's understanding of ontological hierarchy, his carefully crafted conception of emergence (applied both to the person and to society,

but assymetrically), and the distinction he draws between ontological dependence (of the person on its biological constituents) on the one hand and developmental and contextual dependence (of the person on its social and cultural conditions) on the other.

After theoretical groundwork is laid in the Introduction and Chapter 1, the remainder of the book is principally focused on developing a theory of human goods, human motivations, human failures, and human evil (which, as Smith explains, is a necessary complement of a realist account of human motivation and of what is by nature good for human beings). The care and thoughtfulness with which Smith crafts his comprehensive theory (in opposition to widespread competing conceptions) gave me much to ponder, appreciate, and absorb. The book is dense and carefully argued, with a minimum of theoretical jargon, and fairly easy to follow. Smith writes clearly and well.

Polanyi appears not to be a major source or direct influence upon Smith's work, at least not in this book, though Smith does acknowledge *Personal Knowledge* among 17 other books in one endnote listing important sources of the understanding of the person that he espouses. In my judgment, Polanyi's thinking is complementary and at times convergent with Smith's work, especially with respect to their hierarchical ontologies and understandings of causation. However, distinctive elements of Polanyi's epistemology and their implications—such as the tacit, subsidiary dimensions of

explicit knowing, the concept of indwelling, and the fiduciary foundations of all cognitive enterprises—are not to be found. I fail to detect any serious conflict between the two philosophers, though there are no doubt points of tension and disagreement.

Interestingly, from a perspective opened up by the work of William H. Poteat, there is very little account taken by Smith of the role of language, reflexive self-reference, or becoming present and owning oneself before others as essential to the constituting of personhood and personal agency as they are to Poteat. If asked, Smith would no doubt speak of these things as important to the realization or actualization of a person's inherent potential, but not as constitutive of the *being* of a person, which for him must be there from the beginning (i.e., from conception, guiding the *emergence* of personal being).

Some quotations from the book that are well worth pondering:

1. "By 'person' I mean the particular kind of being that under proper conditions is capable of developing into (or has developed into) a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who—as the efficient cause of his or her responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world" (35).

2. "Although they are not ontologically created by society, persons are innately social in their ontological being, in the existential realization of their being, and in the proper teleological ends of their personhood. Social existence is not something alien to persons, added onto personal life as some kind of subsequent experience or obligation placed on humans emerging from an innocent atomistic state of nature. To be a person is to be social" (57f).

3. "…all social structures and institutions are *emergently* dependent upon the ongoing activity of human persons, whereas human persons are only *contextually* and *developmentally* dependent upon the social structures and institutions that nurture and sustain (or perhaps exclude, exploit, and destroy) them" (30).

4. "Personalism begins with a set of assumptions about reality that is both commonsensical and intellectually defensible. Most generally, it assumes that independently of human consciousness, a reality exists that is differentiated, ordered, complex, and stratified" (32).

5. "As to the situating of my argument in the larger field of general theories, readers will soon realize that my personalism is positioned within the broad natural law tradition" (24f).

Dale Cannon
cannondw@wou.edu