

Cultivating Second Nature: An Emerging Philosophy of Education

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In his fine essay on the role of knowledge acquisition in education, Geoffrey Hinchliffe builds to the following statement about education: “Learning does not merely consist of the mastery of concepts and information; what we are looking for is the ability to make judgments.” In light of John McDowell’s theory of mind, Hinchliffe argues, the purpose of education should be to cultivate second nature, more specifically “to develop the capacity to act and judge within the space of reasons.” After explaining McDowell’s theory of mind, Hinchliffe reads Paul Hirst through McDowell, placing Hirst’s forms of knowledge within the space of reasons. Doing so leads to Hinchliffe’s argument for the cultivation of judgment and justification.

In my response, I highlight the significance of Hinchliffe’s use of McDowell and attend to some of the implications of Hinchliffe’s argument that arise along the way. To invite some additional implications and distinctions, I also draw from Christopher Hanks, who makes similar use of McDowell in his essay on indoctrination.¹ My overall question is this: How might we use McDowell and Hinchliffe’s rereading of Hirst to mediate some discussions among philosophers of education about tenacious questions, such as how to cultivate critical thinking, how to argue against normalizing educational practices, and how to imagine a robust epistemology to ground innovative educational research?

In what he calls an attempt at constructive philosophy, McDowell proposes a theory of mind that avoids rampant platonism, bald naturalism, and frictionless spinning. His epistemology rejects both coherentism and conventional foundationalism. Instead, McDowell asks, “How is empirical content possible?”² In other words, how does the world intervene? As Hinchliffe explains, McDowell is not interested in dissolving the mind-world dualism in favor of one or the other, but in articulating a productive relation between them. The space of reasons is where justification occurs, namely where reason and the constraints of the world come together to make judgments. The space of reasons is as much a part of nature as the laws of nature, and with this idea, McDowell can get us beyond the mystification of the mind, whether divine or otherwise transcendent. In one of the more provocative passages in *Mind and World*, McDowell says, “the more we play up the connection between reason and freedom, the more we risk losing our grip on how exercises of concepts can constitute warranted judgments about the world.”³

The alternative position for McDowell is the combination of thinkable content and second nature. Our experience of the world is embedded with conceptual content, and that content transforms our experience of the world. Linking mind with nature, second nature is cultivated as Aristotelian habituation. Hinchliffe argues that education and learning occur in the space of reasons. Second nature habituation is part of *Bildung*; it is reflected in praxis, Hinchliffe suggests; and there is a place for

the aestheticization of experience. Furthermore, it is linked to self-formation and spontaneity, a more precise notion of freedom. Hinchliffe's philosophy of education begins to emerge (and we haven't even gotten to Hirst yet).

Herein is a very useful implication. Learning in the space of reasons is distinctly different from what would follow from the bald naturalism against which McDowell is guarding — perhaps a scientific education, Hinchliffe notes, that would be “dictated by science.” Hinchliffe does not even need to go into detail here, because an education dictated by science sounds familiar enough. But let's sit on this point a minute. “Dictated” could be construed literally, figuratively, discursively, or politically. We have science attempting to dictate education, certainly. On top of that, curriculum policy and implementation strategies tend to operate as if science dictates what knowledge is, evident in the overemphasis on tested knowledge, unwarranted faith in standardized testing, and the rampant practices that promote the normalizing project of public education.⁴ Hinchliffe asks if “scientific approaches to learning are inherently misguided.” Do they “fashion human sensibility in ways of non-spontaneity?” (In other words, do they dehumanize?) These are superb questions, although we need to look at how they might be misguided. Are the ideals misguided? Perhaps not, but is there something about the power of scientific dictates that promotes non-spontaneity?

To explore this tension between an education for second nature and an education dictated by science, Hinchliffe turns to Hirst's classic essay on liberal education.⁵ Rereading Hirst after McDowell makes a great deal of sense. I highly recommend reading Hirst after Hinchliffe, as Hinchliffe offers new precision to Hirst's arguments. It seems that McDowell and Hirst are operating from similar assumptions about the activity of the mind. Hirst does not develop an explicit theory of mind in the essay, so Hinchliffe rereads Hirst for us, making use of McDowell's theory and its level of specificity.

Hirst addresses knowledge in much the same way that McDowell does. His depiction of the rational mind seems to be much the same, the relation between experience and prior thought is clearly a match, and his attention to the “public criteria whereby the true is distinguishable from the false” sounds a lot like McDowell also. Hirst makes quick arguments against the epistemological alternatives that are similar to McDowell's arguments, including a specific argument against rampant platonism.⁶

Revisiting Hirst allows Hinchliffe to further develop a philosophy of education. I wish to read back what I see as the big payoff: “The generation of knowledge ... pervades the whole of experiences of human kind. The clear implication is that experience is constituted through the forms of knowledge.... To the extent that the ‘forms of knowledge’ characterize the articulation and intelligibility of experience then they inhabit the space of reasons and are pervaded by this space.” Hinchliffe further deals with a standard criticism of this essay — that Hirst construes knowledge as a static body of knowledge. Hinchliffe implies that we read into Hirst McDowell's distinction between the realm of law and the space of reasons, and place the forms of knowledge in the space of reasons.

For Hinchliffe, learning is two engagements. The first is the development of judgment and responsibility for one's judgments, what McDowell describes as being answerable to others for our judgments. The second is extrusion of personal considerations when making judgments. Coming in contact with public criteria enables us to set our personal considerations aside. Implied here is the consideration of others and their concerns.

I was at first curious by the turn to Hirst and the question of knowledge acquisition. The turn narrows Hinchliffe's focus for the essay certainly, and after considering the implications of McDowell's theory of mind, I wonder if Hinchliffe is suggesting that the acquisition of knowledge is the most important concern, or perhaps it is the first concern, with other more specific concerns to follow. I believe by focusing on Hirst's forms of knowledge, Hinchliffe is at least implicitly arguing against knowledge acquisition in a conventional sense; what is so simply and cleanly stated in the first paragraph of the essay turns out to be significantly more nuanced.

Finally, I am eager to know how Hinchliffe imagines relating to what I would consider an excellent companion essay to his, Christopher Hanks's essay on indoctrination, in which he uses McDowell to mediate ontological differences he sees between theories of rationality by Jim Garrison and Harvey Siegel. As Hanks describes it, Garrison's commitment to naturalism and Siegel's commitment to transcendence make their approaches incompatible — that is, unless McDowell is brought in to undercut their shared "conception of nature as causal, physical, and deterministic." In some senses, Garrison has features of bald naturalism and Siegel has features of rampant platonism. Hanks argues that the insights of Garrison could be made compatible with McDowell if Garrison emphasized his concern with creativity over his commitment to Darwinian naturalism.⁷

In Siegel's case, Hanks argues the distinction with McDowell is Siegel's defense of absolute truth and "a notion of rationality that transcends specific contexts." A strong difference results, according to Hanks, in relation to spontaneity. If mind is not second nature, McDowell finds "spontaneity passive in its response to experience."⁸ Hanks goes on to argue that McDowell's rationality is what distinguishes him and that rationality would resolve a number of issues. I wonder if Hinchliffe believes Hanks is right on these points and what implications these insights might have on some perennial contested terrain in philosophy of education. Might McDowell be that persuasive?

1. Chris Hanks, "Indoctrination and the Space of Reasons," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 193–212.

2. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), xx–xxi.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. Nel Noddings, *When School Reform Goes Wrong* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007); Michael G. Gunzenhauser, *The Active/Ethical Professional: A Framework for Responsible Educators* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

5. Paul H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge," in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. R.S. Peters (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1973), 87–111.

6. *Ibid.*, 101, 98.

7. Hanks, "Indoctrination and the Space of Reasons," 204, 208.
8. *Ibid.*, 207.