

Human Nature and Second Nature

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In his article, *Modern Science, Philosophical Naturalism and a De-Trivializing of Human Nature*, Koichiro Misawa takes on a complex problem indeed. His point of departure is that modern science trivializes human nature, or unduly separates the *human* from the *natural*, or reduces human nature to animal nature. In either formulation there is (said to be) a tension between the human and the natural, which Misawa aims to dissolve. The solution is argued to lie in the Aristotelian concept of *second nature*, as it is developed and used by John McDowell.

The allegedly problematic dual conception of humans as both cultural and natural is thus seemingly easily solved: MacDowell declares that thinking and knowing are part of nature, our way of being animals,¹ and with that Misawa's article ends. Misawa paints both problem and proffered solution in very broad strokes; "modern science" is for example largely treated as a monolithic entity. I shall in my response develop a few nuances and details to fill out the picture somewhat, and I shall make a few observations about the concept of second nature.

NATURALISM AND MODERN SCIENCE

Naturalism, like any –ism, is an elastic entity encompassing different views and perspectives. Still two defining traits can be identified: First, the rejection of supernatural entities and explanations referring to such entities; and second, the view that philosophy should actively relate to the sciences, especially the natural sciences. It is common to distinguish between two main forms, a strict reductive form and a richer, freer

form.² Misawa mentions both but presents the former more fully, a view that states that natural science provides the only true picture of nature – a view so restrictive it is easy to criticize (and leaves one to wonder if anybody holds it at all). Let us leave it on the sideline.

The two defining traits suggest that naturalistic studies understand humans in relation to nature and as part of nature. This means that all our abilities, properties, and potentials are to be understood in the light of our status as products of evolution. All naturalistic accounts of humans as feeling, communicating, thinking, knowing, acting etc. beings must – more or less strictly – heed this principle: to understand ourselves as products of evolution.

It is not clear (at least not to me) how much influence naturalism has had on philosophy of education. There are some obvious exceptions, such as Dewey, who is not mentioned by Misawa but who preferred the term “naturalism” for his own outlook (albeit naturalism of a distinctive kind) and had great respect for science, its results and theories, and how these profoundly affect our life world.³ Another exception is Hegel, also not mentioned by Misawa, but who already in the 1820s wrote that philosophy should be in line with experiences of nature and that education must take its point of departure in humans as natural.⁴ Or perhaps we should instead regard Hegel as a forerunner, given that he wrote long before the present naturalistic turn.

It is not entirely clear to me what is meant by the claim that naturalism and modern science serve to *trivialize* human nature. As Misawa himself observes, few philosophers (of education) today would deny the *results* of natural scientific research. But what follows from that? What would the knowledge that natural science has given us of the great apes, their emotions, mental and social capacities mean for us, our ethical views in general, and our attitudes to animal welfare in particular? The article

does not dig into questions like this and provides no concrete examples. But which research results could be used and how would or could they affect our understanding of human nature? What new theoretical avenues might be opened? The article remains at the level of “modern science” as an abstract entity without distinguishing between disciplines and without looking at nuances and disagreements within the disciplines. Here is one example of what this conceivably might look like (albeit not from the natural sciences, but from the social sciences): Findings from empirical studies in developmental psychology raise a number of questions for the philosophical understanding of what it means to experience self and others. Thus, Shaun Gallagher and Andrew Meltzoff⁵ argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of what small children are capable of must be revised in the light of new research. For example, children are able to monitor own movements and correct them relative to a visual target at a much younger age than Merleau-Ponty assumed. Empirical results such as these tell us something about the nature of infants, perhaps shift the balance between what is natural and what is learned, and are fairly straightforwardly relevant to phenomenological understandings and investigations.⁶ There is no shortage of material to use, e.g. from biology, to start filling in the gaps between modern science and philosophy (of education). As we all know, such explorations may lead to good things and bad things, perhaps to a trivialization of human nature but also to new possible theoretical pathways and understandings.

SECOND NATURE

If we accept Misawa’s premise that modern science trivializes human nature; should we then accept his suggestion that the concept of *second nature* is the solution? Misawa himself certainly thinks so; he argues that McDowell revives the specialness of human nature that the

modern scientific view of nature has trivialized.

Which problem does McDowell himself set out to solve? In *Mind and World* he first argues that certain aspects of human reason and understanding cannot be captured by descriptions in ordinary naturalistic terms, since that would involve placing things in the realm of law, as he puts it.⁷ This understanding of naturalism would force us to answer questions concerning human belief, reason, and understanding either by reference to the supernatural or by reference to lawfulness, necessity, etc. The problem is thus a “naturalism that leaves nature disenchanting.”⁸ A solution to this problem involves a reconceptualization of what counts as natural, and it is here that we find his second nature, which as Misawa says arises from McDowell’s discussion of Aristotelian ethics.

In many ways this is Hegelian: We humans are born with natural propensities and potentials which we seek to actualize and hone through education, upbringing, and *Bildung*. In McDowell’s terms, it is our (first) nature to realize our second nature. We are initiated into a space of reasons by processes of education, ethical upbringing, enculturation, and immersion in tradition, and the resulting habits of thought and action are second nature. The process of enculturation by which second nature is acquired McDowell calls *Bildung*. *Bildung* is a process that makes it natural for us that we should exhibit certain habits. Our *first* nature and its relation to our second could have been an interesting issue to discuss given the aim of this article.

Misawa does not mention McDowell’s use of the term *Bildung*. That is an unfortunate omission. This, I think, should be of great interest to philosophers of education because it serves to connect *second nature* to a huge, rich field of educational inquiry, most notably found in continental philosophy of education (but evidently spilling over into McDowell’s naturalistic vocabulary). *Bildung* tends to be discussed in terms of deep

transformation of self and qualitative changes in knowledge, insight, understanding, judgment, and capacity for action; autonomy and morality often figure among its “aims.” Compared with this, it is a question how deep the habits that are natural to enculturated humans actually go, and existing *Bildung* theory might thus be employed in a critical discussion of McDowell’s views. On the other hand, while current *Bildung* theory may reveal second nature to be rather thin, second nature may bring *Bildung* theory down to earth, make it tractable, less mysterious, less romantic, more accessible – and quite possibly heed the results of science.

Summing up, Misawa’s paper grapples with very big issues indeed but paints them in too broad strokes. Concrete examples, nuances, and distinctions would clearly have added to the discussion. The rich field of *Bildung* theory is not touched upon despite McDowell’s use of the term, and opportunities to bring the two into potentially fruitful contact with each other are therefore missed.

1 John McDowell, “Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Naturalism in Question*, eds. Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 91-105.

2 Peter Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties: the Woodbridge Lectures 1983* (London: Routledge, 1985).

3 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958 [1929]).

4 G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts. Werke 7* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). Originally published 1821.

5 Shaun Gallagher and Andrew Meltzoff, “The earliest sense of self and others: Merleau-Ponty and recent developmental studies,” *Philosophical Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1996): 211-233.

6 Thanks to my colleague Einar Sundsdal at the Norwegian University for Science and Technology for bringing this example to my attention.

7 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 87.

8 *Ibid.*, 85.