Georg W. Bertram*

Two Conceptions of Second Nature

Abstract: The concept of second nature promises to provide an explanation of how nature and reason can be reconciled. But the concept is laden with ambiguity. On the one hand, second nature is understood as that which binds together all cognitive activities. On the other hand, second nature is conceived of as a kind of nature that can be changed by cognitive activities. The paper tries to investigate this ambiguity by distinguishing a Kantian conception of second nature from a Hegelian conception. It argues that the idea of a transformation from a being of first nature into a being of second nature that stands at the heart of the Kantian conception is mistaken. The Hegelian conception demonstrates that the transformation in question takes place within second nature itself. Thus, the Hegelian conception allows us to understand the way in which second nature is not structurally isomorphic with first nature: It is a process of ongoing selftransformation that is not primarily determined by how the world is, but rather by commitments out of which human beings are bound to the open future.

The concept of second nature has had an impressive career in recent years, which has largely been driven by its promise to reconcile reason and nature. The need for such a reconciliation arises from the simple fact that without it, all attempts to integrate reason into nature appear mysterious and obscure. The basic idea expressed by the concept of second nature is that it is the nature of human beings to be rational. According to this line of thought, rationality must not be conceived of as something wholly distinct from nature, but rather as something that has a place within nature. It is important to note that the nature in question is misconstrued if one takes it to be nature in the sense of causal laws. Rather, rationality has to be conceived of as a natural transformation of nature. In this way, the concept of second nature seems to provide an anti-dualistic explanation of reason.

But what is second nature? In simplified terms, second nature is a nature that is developed out of cognitive activities. This does not mean that specific human beings bring this nature into existence on the basis of their own cognitive activities alone. Second nature is not established by a given set of cognitive activities that could be identified. Rather, it is constituted by indeterminate cognitive activities within a specific historical tradition and functions as the framework for cognitive activities in general. In this sense, human beings grow up in the midst of second nature: Nothing they do can be accomplished independently of it.[1]

But what exactly is the content of the concept of second nature? It seems to me that a fundamental ambiguity lingers in the explanations of what second nature is. On the one hand, second nature is understood as that which binds together all cognitive activities.[2] On the other hand, second nature is conceived of as a nature that can be changed by cognitive activities. At first glance, it seems that these two explanations go

---

1 Within the hermeneutic tradition, the very idea of second nature as a framework for cognitive activities has often been articulated with the concept of the world. See, for instance, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§ 14, 15, 18.
2 This understanding of second nature has often been discussed in terms of "habit"; see Menke, "Hegel's Theory of Second Nature."

---

*Corresponding author: Georg W. Bertram, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany; E-mail: georg.bertram@fu-berlin.de

hand in hand. One might be tempted to say that while cognitive activities gain their intelligibility against the background of second nature, they may themselves be able to change this background. But harmony is not that easy to attain here, and the ambiguity is not eliminated by merely combining the two explanations.

To remove this ambiguity, I distinguish between two conceptions of second nature. In this article, I elaborate on these two conceptions and argue why one of them is more compelling than the other. They can be labeled, respectively, the Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of second nature, though it is important to note that neither Kant nor Hegel themselves explicitly formulated the conceptions of second nature that I associate with their names.[3] Nevertheless, I would like to highlight a crucial difference that emerges if one seeks to develop a conception of second nature out of their respective philosophies.[4] The two thinkers' conceptions of how to understand the reconciliation between reason and nature diverge sharply. In what follows, it may seem that the conceptions that I distinguish are irreconcilable with one another and that the Hegelian conception is thoroughly superior. But this is not what I want to show. Rather, I want to demonstrate that the content of the Kantian conception – and that of McDowell, which I associate with it – should itself be articulated in Hegelian terms. The conceptions can be combined with one another – but, in the end, on Hegelian grounds.

The inquiry is divided into three parts. In the first part, I lay out a Kantian conception of second nature that is, in my opinion, best represented in the work of John McDowell, arguably the most prominent contemporary proponent of the concept of second nature.[5] The second part contrasts the Kantian conception of second nature with the concept that I associate with Hegel. Once the contrast is made clear, I will, in the third part, consider how the Kantian could defend his position and identify some important holes in the defense. The conclusion explains why the Kantian's intended message should be articulated in Hegelian language.

1 The Kantian Conception of Second Nature

Over the last few years, John McDowell has developed an influential conception of second nature in several papers and in his path-breaking book, *Mind and World*. McDowell presents his concept as a combination of themes from the philosophies of Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and quite a few others. In doing so, he in effect suggests that his concept of second nature is implicitly supported by a significant consensus within an important branch of Western philosophy, namely hermeneutics (broadly understood). But does this hold water? Evaluating whether or not it does demands getting a better understanding of what McDowell means when he talks about second nature, which I think can broadly be summed up by three claims:

(1) Conceptual structures precede the activities of individual human beings in general. All human activities rely on structures that they did not establish by themselves.
(2) It is therefore necessary that human beings are introduced to conceptual structures while they mature. Human beings need to be educated in or – as McDowell puts it – initiated into the space of reasons.
(3) By means of their initiation into the space of reasons, a transformation takes place: the first nature to which human beings belong when they are born is transformed into a second nature.

Let's call (1) the preceding principle, (2) the initiation principle, and (3) the transformation principle. The preceding principle (1) is the most important point that McDowell wants to develop in his concept of second

---

3 This is especially important to stress since Hegel, in his so-called philosophy of subjective spirit, himself described habits as an individual subject's second nature. See Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, §§ 409–10.
4 To distinguish between the Kantian and the Hegelian conception of second nature implies that the idea of a continuous movement from Kant to Hegel, which is quite common nowadays, is not completely justified. One of the most influential interpretations drawing such a reconciliatory picture of this movement is found in Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*.
5 In claiming that McDowell advocates a Kantian conception of second nature, I do not want to assert that McDowell ascribes a conception of second nature to Kant. I am aware that McDowell emphasizes explicitly that the concept of second nature is precisely that which Kant lacks. But this does not mean that McDowell introduces the concept of second nature against Kant. Rather, he thinks that it is necessary to say what Kant wants to say in those places where the concept is missing. See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 99.

nature. According to this principle, conceptual structures are not developed by the activities of human beings.[6] For a user of concepts, conceptual structures are always already there. Thus, for McDowell, the decisive notion for understanding conceptual structures are not thought or action, but rather experience. The reason is that an adequate explanation of experience illuminates concept users' constitutive openness to the world, in the sense that they have acquired capacities that allow them to grasp how the world confronts them with conceptual structures. Their receptivity is inextricably bound up with conceptuality; indeed, it is itself a conceptual practice. It follows that there is no boundary that separates conceptual from non-conceptual aspects of experience. This is why McDowell speaks of the "unboundedness of the conceptual."[7] This definition of experience is the keystone of McDowell's assertion that conceptual structures are not brought forth by concept users, but rather precede them; put differently, the precedence of conceptual structures is not temporal, but rather logical, that is, following the order of dependence. As such, they confront concept users with demands that they have to abide by. McDowell articulates the fundamental idea motivating the concept of second nature as follows: "The idea is that the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them..."[8] Expressing this idea programmatically, he writes: "We are looking for a conception of our nature that includes a capacity to resonate to the structure of the space of reasons."[9] Second nature is the name for a concept that adheres to what I call the preceding principle.

However, this requires asking how human beings can be receptive to a conceptually structured reality in the first place. McDowell answers this question with the initiation principle (2): Processes of education are essential for acquiring second nature. Through these processes, individual human beings acquire the capacities to receive conceptual structures. In so doing, individual human beings have to be guided by other human beings who are already familiar with the established conceptual structures. McDowell thus explains what second nature is in the following way: "Our nature is largely second nature, and our second nature is the way it is not just because of the potentialities we were born with, but also because of our upbringing, our *Bildung*."[10] This statement highlights an important implication – which McDowell does not hold explicitly[11] – of the initiation principle, an implication that yields the transformation principle (3). Human beings are born with a first nature. They have natural capacities. By undergoing the process of education/initiation, the first nature capacities of human beings become transformed in such a way that they take on a new form – a form in which conceptual structures permeate everything. Since experience plays a fundamental role in McDowell's explanations, capacities of perception are very apt for giving an example for how this transformation works. The implication of McDowell's theory of second nature is that when human beings are born, they have natural perceptual capacities. They perceive in ways similar to how other animals perceive. But once they have undergone the process of education, this stops being true. As a result of this process, conceptually structured perceptual capacities come to belong to the second nature of the human being. Thus, the transformation does not only consist in the acquisition of conceptual abilities. It consists in a thorough permeation of all human capacities by conceptual structures.

This brief recap of McDowell's concept of second nature should be sufficient to address the question as to what extent it can be called Kantian. Two aspects are decisive. First, McDowell's conception of second nature entails the idea that conceptual structures permeate the cognitive capacities of the human being. I have already emphasized that perceptual capacities play a central role in McDowell's view. McDowell

---

6 In this vein, McDowell criticized the pragmatist position held by Robert Brandom (see, for instance, McDowell, "How Not to Read 'Philosophical Investigations': Brandom's Wittgenstein"). McDowell can be understood as claiming that the pragmatist conception violates the preceding principle.

7 See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 2nd lecture.

8 McDowell, *Mind and World*, 91.

9 Ibid., 109.

10 Ibid., 87.

11 Charles Larmore and Crispin Wright have criticized McDowell for not providing a substantial explanation of how *Bildung* works, even though they themselves take two very different approaches to the issue (see Larmore, "Attending to Reasons"; Wright, "Human Nature?"). But I think that McDowell implies an explanation of how *Bildung* works, which I seek to capture with the transformation principle.

thereby redeploys the Kantian explanation of the intersection of sensibility and understanding.[12] With this explanation, Kant provides the original model for a conception of second nature that holds second nature to be a realm thoroughly permeated by conceptual structures.[13] As we have seen, McDowell's philosophy suggests that this permeation is achieved by a transformation of first nature capacities. Thus, the result of the transformation is essentially the Kantian notion of sensibility, and, vice-versa, the Kantian notion of sensibility now has to be understood as the result of a transformation. Second, McDowell's conception of second nature is bound up with the idea that conceptuality belongs to the realm in which human beings live. Even though McDowell decisively argues against the idea that human beings establish conceptual structures through their activities, he retains the claim that conceptuality is an intrinsic part of human activities. The conceptual structures characteristic of second nature are only actualized by means of human activities. And, of course, practices that actualize conceptual structures are established through education: Human beings learn how to be responsive to reasons. By engaging in practices of giving and asking for reasons, they actualize the conceptual structures they have inherited.

In summary, I think that the Kantian conception[14] takes second nature to be an *achievement*, because it holds that second nature is reconstituted over and over again after being established. And it is an achievement in a double sense, because it is achieved by a collective and, at the same time, by individual human beings. Note that it is not an achievement that human beings bring about in their activities by explicitly aiming to influence or create second nature. Rather, second nature is just that which is natural for human beings to establish; they cannot do otherwise. The achievement character of second nature is reflected in how McDowell explains experience. Once an individual is initiated into second nature (or put differently: once an individual is constituted as a subject[15]), she or he experiences a conceptually structured world. By experiencing the world in this way, the subject is affirmed in her or his second-nature capacities, and the world is affirmed in its structures. In this way, the subject participates in an achievement. According to the Kantian conception, second nature is thus self-sufficient in two senses: first, it is reconstituted by every practice belonging to it; and second, nothing can occur within it that would disturb its essential structure, which is that of rationality. The realm of conceptuality is, in McDowell's words, unbounded.

2 The Hegelian Conception of Second Nature

The Kantian conception of second nature is compelling and one might thus wonder if there is any reason to disagree with it. Indeed, one gets the impression that the Kantian conception is the only way to reconcile nature and reason. If one wants to explain this reconciliation, what could be more convincing than to claim that reason belongs to human nature? And if one wants to explain the sense that the concept of second nature has here, what could be more convincing than to claim that this nature is the result of a transformation of the first nature that human beings have as mere animals?

---

12 McDowell shares the interpretation that the intersection of sensibility and understanding is what Kant argues for in the second version of the transcendental deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding. See McDowell, "Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint."

13 According to an influential position in contemporary Kant scholarship (see, for instance, Bauer, "A Peculiar Intuition: Kant's Conceptualist Account of Perception"; Griffith, "Perception and the Categories: A Conceptualist Reading of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason"), the transcendental deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding has to be understood as teaching us such a lesson. It shows that the pure forms of intuition (space and time) are themselves determined by the pure concepts of the understanding. With this reading, Kant conceives of human sensibility in such a way that its very forms are conceptually structured.

14 It is important to note that, in his anthropological writings, Kant provides resources for an account of rationality as second nature that goes far beyond what I have developed here with reference to McDowell. See Wood, "Kant and the Problem of Human Nature."

15 McDowell has argued that Davidson's neglect of the second-nature character of the human being leads to his inability to explain how a subject is constituted; see McDowell's remark in: "Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism," especially page 184.

But it is the very idea of transformation that leads to some doubts. One might describe them as Hegelian doubts: According to the transformation principle, transformation leads from one nature to the other – from first nature to second nature. Thus, the transformation takes place outside of second nature. It starts within first nature and is successfully finished when second nature is finally attained. However, this picture of transformation as a process that takes place outside of second nature is problematic, and McDowell's reasoning makes it unthinkable. Convincingly, McDowell argues that it is not possible to entertain a sideways-on perspective on the way conceptual structures relate to the things grasped within these structures.[16] In short, we cannot separate ourselves from the world we live in and take a detached look at how the rational practices we engage in capture what lies outside them. This claim of McDowell's has significant consequences for our understanding of the transformation leading from first nature to second nature. We can get an idea of what these consequences are if we alter the claim I attributed to McDowell in the next to last sentence: We cannot separate ourselves from the world we live in and take a detached look at the way rational practices evolve out of a child's first nature, which lies outside them. The first nature from which the transformation takes off is a first nature that is grasped from within the conceptual realm. Thus, the very idea of a transformation that leads from first nature to second nature has to be understood differently than the way the transformation principle articulates it. Transformation does not take place outside of second nature, but within it. What the Kantian explains in terms of initiation or education is an element of second nature itself.

The Kantian conception thus tries to combine two claims. On the one hand, it holds that second nature is a transformation of first nature, a reorganization of the capacities of a natural being. In this sense, McDowell says that "human infants are mere animals."[17] Through education, the animals in question are transformed into members of the space of reasons. On the other hand, the Kantian conception proclaims the impossibility of a sideways-on perspective on rational capacities. It thus holds that it is not possible for concept users to leave the realm of concepts and it is thus not possible to assess the borders of the conceptual realm.

But the thesis of the "unboundedness of the conceptual" may be theoretically unsettling. As long as the borders of the conceptual realm cannot be accessed, it is not possible to clearly delineate what that realm is. One may get the impression that we are fundamentally incapable of obtaining a clear understanding of what rationality consists in. To avoid this impression, it is tempting to develop a distinction that would allow us to clearly draw the borders of the realm of rationality.[18] The transformation principle does just this. Since it states that the transformation lies outside the realm of second nature, it implies – against McDowell's explicit intention – that second nature has a border. The resulting conceptual framework relies on the idea of two realms being distinct from one another.[19] There is one realm, that of first nature, which the human infant (as an animal) has to leave, and there is another realm, that of second nature, which it has to reach. This picture suggests that, if everything goes well, the human infant will in the end be within the second realm. Note that McDowell illuminatingly speaks of a "decent upbringing,"[20] i.e. an upbringing that secures that the second realm is in fact attained.[21] But these aspects of the Kantian conception are

---

16 See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 34, and passim.

17 Ibid., 123.

18 This criticism of the Kantian conception might also be articulated in the language of philosophical anthropology: McDowell's claim that the conceptual has no boundaries may have the consequence that human (second) nature is not firm and stable, but rather that it is left undetermined (for a first and influential formulation of this anthropological claim see Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, part one, second section). According to my interpretation, McDowell does not want to accept this consequence of his position and therefore implicitly holds on to the transformation principle.

19 The very idea of a transformation of first nature into second nature resembles Kant's conception of the transformation of things into appearances and, therewith, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves. This is ironic, seeing as how McDowell tries to read Kant in a way that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is disarmed. But with the transformation principle, his own conception of second nature seems to be haunted by a distinction similar to the Kantian one.

20 McDowell, *Mind and World*, 82.

21 If one takes the transformation into a second nature as a process within second nature itself, it is not important to distinguish a "decent upbringing" from one that is mediocre: every upbringing has to be understood as a transformation in the relevant sense.

deeply misleading, for they rely on the idea that the transformation takes place outside the realm of second nature. If we take McDowell's lesson about the impossibility of thematizing our conceptual capacities from a detached perspective seriously, then we can't hold on to this view.

These critical reflections on the Kantian conception can be turned into important components of a different position in at least two ways. Firstly, the conception of first nature that human beings develop has to be understood as a second-nature conception of first nature.[22] The distinction human beings draw is a distinction that is established in and through second nature. Human beings differentiate themselves from first nature and thus from the way mere animals behave through a distinctive set of practices. But the respective descriptions of first nature are not given from a sideways-on view. Rather, they are given from within a perspective that is inextricably anchored in second nature.

Secondly, and most importantly, the transformation in question has to be understood as a self-transformation. The conception of first nature that human beings develop when they conceive of their infants as mere animals has to be understood as a conception they hold when they want to initiate the process of transformation that they think will bring the child into a second-nature state. The initiation of a young child into a culture is based on the contrastive idea that it does not initially belong to second nature. Human beings introduce their understanding of how the transformation works or should work into their conception of first nature.[23] Since those who undergo the process (human infants) are just what those who initiate the process take themselves to be – namely humans – the transformation in question has to be understood as a self-transformation, namely, as a transformation of the self-conception of what the human being is.

The idea of such self-transformation can be illuminated by considering the fact that adults transform themselves by initiating children into their own culturally specific practices. In their interactions with children, adults explain how something is done, how something is said, how one should comport oneself, etc. But the explanations given are not only directed towards the children. They also imply something about the self-understanding of those who give them. By thematizing their own practices in their interactions with children, adults get a clearer idea of the way they themselves conceive of these practices. That is, they gain a clearer idea of what is essential to these practices, their history, which elements of a tradition should be preserved and which should be abandoned, etc. It follows that the initiation of children into second nature has to be understood as a process of reflecting on the practices that belong to second nature itself. The transformation that takes place is not directed toward the child as a mere animal. It is directed towards the practices that both the adults and the child participate in. Adults thematize these practices with regard to their structures, with regard to their justifications, and with regard to many other points. In doing so, they contribute to the development of the practices in question. And since they participate in these practices, they contribute to the development of themselves. The initiation of the child is a function of this development. Thus, the transformation of the child is the function of a transformation within second nature in general.

Along these lines, our understanding of the transformation that takes place within second nature has to be changed decisively: It has to be understood as a change in self-understanding, as opposed to a change in our understanding of objects. Only then can the transformation be grasped as genuinely belonging to what second nature is. It is no longer understood as something that lies outside second nature, but rather as an essential part of it. According to this new perspective, second nature has to be understood as an ongoing transformation within nature itself.[24] This transformation has to be understood in terms

---

22 Theodor W. Adorno's famous phrase: "Second nature is, in truth, first nature" ("Es ist in Wahrheit die zweite Natur die erste") can be understood in this way (see Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History", 124).

23 Explaining how second nature relates itself to and differentiates itself from first nature in this way helps one to better understand how second nature is not just another version of first nature. Rather, it has to be conceived of as being structurally different from first nature. It is characteristic for several positions that rely on the idea of second nature that they take this nature to be structurally isomorphic with first nature (see McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism"; Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*, 183–84). But second nature has to be understood as being quite different from first nature structurally. Second nature is the process of constantly determining first nature and negotiating the relation one has to it.

24 Hegel uses the concept of "self-movement" to describe the transformation internal to second nature (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 15).

of processes that subjects initiate again and again (in educating their children, in criticizing ideological structures, in reflecting on scientific practices, etc.).[25] It follows that second nature is bound up with the process of constantly reconfiguring the notion subjects have of their first nature and of the relation they have to it. The productive self-reflection on the way subjects conceive of their first nature thus stands at the center of what second nature is. This gives rise to a new conception of second nature that can be expressed in the following three claims:

(4) Human activities are intrinsically bound up with both the self-reflective alienation from what they take first nature to be and the self-reflective determination of their relation to it.

(5) The relation stated by (4) is realized in an endless process of self-transformation and self-initiation.

(6) Conceptual structures are the medium in which self-reflective determinations can be developed in such a way that the subjects who develop them can reflect on them.

As I noted at the beginning, this conception of second nature is Hegelian in spirit, a point that I'll underscore by explaining the three claims with reference to Hegel's philosophy. Let's call (4) the alienation principle, (5) the self-transformation principle, and (6) the practices of reflection principle. As for the alienation principle (4), Hegel's conception of absolute spirit gives us a good basis for providing an explanation. It basically says that spirit is absolute in the sense that it is only itself in its relation to its other. Or to use another important piece of Hegel's terminology: Absolute spirit sublates its alienation.[26] Applied to the problem of second nature, the argument goes like this: Spirit is Hegel's concept for self-determining historical-cultural practices. Self-determining historical-cultural practices are absolute if they are not opposed to nature and natural capacities, but take nature and natural capacities as a dimension of their own development.[27] Thus, it is first of all necessary that second-nature beings learn to distance themselves from nature as from something that belongs to themselves. They have to pass through alienation. This occurs in the process of forming self-understandings within reflective practices (a first idea of what this means will be provided in the explanations of [5] and [6]).

Once a structure of alienation is established, it is possible for second-nature beings to grasp nature as both alien to historical-cultural practices and as identical to them. To illustrate this, consider that, within the conceptual space, one can always (critically) reflect on the fact that concepts are inadequate for describing some individual, object, property, event and so on (think of paradigm cases like experimental results in the natural sciences that do not fit the established theories or aesthetic experiences). Within a conceptual practice that has sublated alienation, elements of first nature can affect the way concepts are formed. Thus, (first) nature is not only a space permeated by conceptual structures, but is understood as something that can function as a force capable of altering conceptual structures, insofar as it cannot be completely subsumed by them. In short, the Hegelian conception offers a more robust conception of first nature than did the Kantian conception. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Hegelian version does not simply oppose nature to conceptual structures. Rather, it defines conceptual practices in such a way that nature can be understood as a force of resistance. This makes it easy to see how nature can be taken to be *identical* with historical-cultural practices. According to Hegel, this identity has to be understood as resulting out of the critical effect that nature has on historical-cultural practices. Thus, it belongs to them in at least three ways: firstly, as a space of experience and action; secondly, in prompting a development of conceptual structures in the way described above; and thirdly, in having a history that has to be grasped through the relationship between nature and historical-cultural practices. Even though nature is neither history nor culture, it is a space that historical-cultural practices take as belonging to themselves.

Hegel's concept of absolute spirit implies a different reconciliation between reason and nature than that articulated by the Kantian conception of second nature. The Hegelian reconciliation does not rely on

---

25 One may wonder whether this happens with young children, too. But an adequate description of what young children do has to capture the way they "teach" others (other children and adults, too) and themselves.

26 See the chapter "Absolute Knowledge" in: Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

27 Consider Hegel's famous claim: "Such an other, determined as other, is physical nature; it is the other of spirit" (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 118).

the idea that reason and nature are inextricably united, but rather on the idea that reason is constituted by relating itself to nature. This is to say that reason is constituted by both differentiating itself from and finding itself in nature. The reconciliation is based on the process of the alienation of reason from nature. Hegel contends that it is only by means of its alienation from nature that the identification of reason with nature is possible. This has the consequence that the reconciliation of reason and nature can only be realized in a process. This brings us to (5).

The self-transformation principle (5) articulates the most important shift entailed by the Hegelian conception of second nature.[28] The self-reflective determinations (self-understandings) that reason brings about are developed in an ongoing process. This process is itself the result of a transformation of the process of experience, which Hegel characterizes as a "path of despair."[29] The process of experience is a path of despair because the determinations that the conscious subject wants to retain as stable are negated again and again. Thus, on its path of despair, the conscious subject undergoes a process of constant transformation. Through this process, the conscious subject becomes self-conscious in such a way that it learns to initiate the process of transformation out of itself. If the subject is self-conscious, it not only experiences transformations by having its notions negated, but performs transformations on its own (think, for instance, of the historical process of enlightenment in general or of processes of individual religious conversion). This explanation enables us to understand the ultimate consequence of what the alienation principle (4) states: Subjects are able to relate to what is alien to them as, on the one hand, alien to them and, on the other, as being identical to them. But this is only possible if they have acquired the capacity of self-transformation. The identity of the self-conscious subject is a result of the "labor of the negative."[30] With his notion of a subject that sublates this path of despair, Hegel implies that such transformation does not result in second nature as a state in which transformation is ended. Indeed, transformation is an essential dimension of second nature. Practices of initiation and education that children pass through do not lie at the border of second nature, but rather at the center of it. As Hegel clearly states, education has to be understood as a practice that subjects or cultures develop for themselves.[31] Thus, the self-understandings that self-conscious subjects develop are brought forth by practices of self-initiation.

At first glance, self-initiation sounds paradoxical. Self-initiation seems to imply that one has already attained the capacities that one wants to acquire through the initiation itself. But this is a misunderstanding, a point that becomes clearer by critically examining one of the principles of the Kantian conception, namely, the preceding principle (1). The Kantian conception presupposes that initiation has to be conceived of as the transference of capacities that are already established within a tradition. According to this presupposition, it makes sense to claim that every initiation relies on something that is already established. But this presupposition is questionable. Initiation can easily be conceived in another way. Think of the case in which I try to teach myself piano and repeat exercises that I think are useful for training specific techniques. My practice is oriented towards the development of capacities that I would like to see realized in the future. But as many of us know, the realization we aim at by training ourselves on instruments like the piano is not something that repetition can guarantee. My self-initiation on the piano is not a realization of capacities that I already have. It is a projection of myself into the future: of myself as having capacities the possession of which I currently don't know anything about. By initiating myself in this way, I commit myself to an open future in projecting myself as a certain person.

It is important to understand such binding to an open future in the way Heidegger understands it: A subject is constituted as a unit by being constitutively incomplete.[32] Being bound to an open future is not a commitment of a subject that is already complete. It is a commitment that makes me into a subject. But

28 For an explanation of Hegel's philosophy that articulates important aspects of the principle in question see Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*.

29 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 52.

30 Ibid., 13.

31 See Hegel's chapter on "Bildung" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; for a systematic interpretation see Bertram, *Hegel's "Phänomenologie des Geistes"*, 191–220.

32 See esp. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 48.

since the process of being a subject is bound to the openness of the future, it can never be completed.[33] Understood in this way, the situation of an adult can be placed in analogy with the situation of a child. Self-initiation is not rooted in a subjectivity that has already been completely constituted. Rather, it is an essential dimension of being a subject. Self-initiation has to be grasped as the realization of determinations by which human beings bind themselves to their own open future, such that these determinations are constitutively bound up with indeterminacy. By realizing the projects they commit themselves to, human beings expose themselves to indeterminacy, because they cannot wholly determine how their projects will turn out. Conceived in this way, self-initiation no longer appears as a paradoxical idea.

Last but not least, there's the practices of reflection principle (6): For Hegel, like for Kant, the processes of transformation essential for second nature are intrinsically connected with conceptuality. Hegel once again explains the connection in question with his concept of absolute spirit. He holds that processes of self-transformation presuppose practices of reflection through which self-understandings can be formed and transformations can be articulated.[34] Hegel specifies three practices of reflection: namely, art, religion and philosophy.[35] According to Hegel, these practices of reflection are the condition of possibility for that which develops out of processes of self-transformation. For the present purpose, I'm not going to go into how Hegel defines the three practices of reflection and their differences, nor do I want to engage with why and in what sense Hegel takes philosophy to be the – at least in some way – highest practice of reflection. My only concern lies in the fact that Hegel defines philosophy as something that is essentially related to conceptual structures. In highlighting the specific role of philosophy, Hegel claims that conceptual practices in which the concept "knows itself as the concept" are essential for the practices of self-transformation entailed by the aforementioned principle.[36] These practices thematize conceptual structures as such. For Hegel, such thematization is the condition of possibility of a revision of conceptual structures. And such revision of conceptual structures is the condition of possibility of articulating oneself in one's practices of self-transformation. The idea that conceptual structures can be revised distinguishes mere transformation from self-transformation. Mere transformations that happen to us are often prompted by the world. The resistance of objects makes us alter our plans or change our concepts. By contrast, self-transformation is transformation that we enact with regard to what we take ourselves to be. Such self-transformation is only brought forth by conceptual changes realized through practices of reflection. It presupposes a reflective revision of conceptual structures (think of: "We thought that critique was brought about by revisions of thought, but now we take critique to consist only in resistance in the streets.") Philosophy is thus a practice of reflection in which transformations can be realized that do not merely happen to take place, but are initiated and reflected on by subjects.

In sum, this Hegelian conception of second nature conceives of second nature as a *task*. According to Hegel, second nature always remains unstable and open, even though it has to be worked out in a concrete way over and over again. It is unstable because processes of self-transformation can always be interrupted, become alienated from themselves, or congeal. And it is open because processes of self-transformation are never fully completed but are – as we have seen – always oriented towards an open future. Practices of self-transformation are essentially bound up with the idea that transformation is actualized in the future. Hegel articulates the temporal structure of transformation with his concept of speculation. Speculation is the process by which the being of somebody or something is determined through its relation to the future, which in turn loops back into what has been the present.[37] Thus, speculation has – as several commentators

---

33 I disagree with Robert Pippin, who takes Hegel to understand subjectivity as a state of an individual within a community and as a state that can be completed; see, for instance, Pippin. "What is the Question for Which Hegel's Theory of Recognition is the Answer?", 162–63.

34 For an explanation on these lines see Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, ch. 6.

35 See Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, §§ 556–77.

36 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 461.

37 This structure is nicely captured by how Hegel explains what he calls speculative judgment: "The nature of judgment, or of the proposition per se, which includes the difference between subject and predicate within itself, is destroyed by the speculative judgment, and the identical proposition, which the former comes to be, contains the counter-stroke to those relations." (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 39).

of Hegel have argued – a retroactive structure[38]: Only from the perspective of the future can one say what a speculative determination has been. Thus, the retroactive structure is the flip side of the projective structure that I highlighted above. It makes the development of speculative determinations essential for the Hegelian conception of what second nature is. For this reason, second nature is not stable and secure (as the Kantian conception suggests), but is rather unstable and ever-changing. This is just to say that second nature is not a nature that is achieved. Rather, second nature is a task.

3 A Kantian Defense and a Hegelian Counter

The Kantian might make two objections against the Hegelian conception of second nature, which I will try to articulate in the spirit of McDowell:

(7) The activism objection: The Hegelian conception of second nature requires a far too active notion of human cognition.

(8) The relativism objection: The Hegelian conception of second nature implies a relativist conception of rationality.

The first objection is obvious. It seems that the Hegelian conception is guilty of violating a basic aspect of the idea of second nature, namely, that the human being is a finite being. If the Hegelian conception states that second nature is an endless process of self-transformation, then it seems to endow the human being with infinite capacities. The Hegelian conception appears to entail a sort of metaphysical hubris.

But the objection is not convincing. Certainly, the Hegelian might admit, the Kantian conception of second nature is right to claim that human beings are finite and that the way the world is structured is not up to them. But the justification the Kantian gives for this claim is wrong. The Kantian contends that the world is not up to us because it has to be given to human perception. This explanation is not satisfying for the Hegelian because it does not explain how what is given has significance for human beings. The Kantian need not deny that what is given is relevant for those to whom it is given. But the conception of givenness alone does not explain the relevance at issue. The Kantian has to explain why something matters to human beings in a separate step.[39]

The separation between the explanation of what limits human beings and the explanation of what matters to them[40] is just what the Hegelian conception aims to overcome. It explains that human beings cannot wholly determine the open future to which their commitments are constitutively related. The Hegelian position is justified by its take on that which is not up to human beings. In contrast to McDowell's notion of experience as something that reconstitutes second-nature human capacities and conceptual structures, the Hegelian asserts that that which stands outside of human beings' control simply goes beyond their grasp. What is not up to human beings cannot in principle be dominated by them and thus does not affirm them in their capacities. This is the open future. From the perspective of the Hegelian, the human being is not limited by how the world is. Rather, it is limited by the binding relations it entertains with the future.

If one follows the Kantian path, one ends up with a problematic choice. Either one conceives of human beings as being limited by what is given to them in experience. But in this case one has to subscribe to Kant's doctrine of the thing in itself. Or one conceives of what is given in experience as being simply familiar to human beings (as McDowell does for good reasons). In this case, one fails to grasp the finitude of the

---

38 See Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, ch. 7.

39 This is evident by the way in which Kant's critical philosophy distinguishes between questions of theoretical and questions of practical philosophy, i.e., by the way in which the *Critique of Pure Reason* differs from the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It is only the latter that provides an explanation of how things can be significant for human beings. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* can be read as an insufficient attempt to close the gap between the explanation of givenness, on the one hand, and the explanation of relevance, on the other.

40 It is important to see that McDowell cannot accept this separation of explanations, which he nevertheless does, because his position is mainly concerned with how the world is permeated with ethical concepts and virtues. See McDowell, *Mind and World*, 78–84.

human being.[41] The fork in the road reveals how the Kantian objection to the Hegelian conception turns against itself. With the idea of self-transformation, the Hegelian conception offers a better explanation of second nature that more adequately accounts for the finitude of the human being.

The second objection follows out of Hegel's attention to historical-cultural practices. While Kant conceives of rationality in a more or less ahistorical manner, Hegel thinks it is rooted in historical-cultural practices. This difference is mirrored in the respective conceptions of second nature. The Kantian conception pictures human practice as something stabilized by its second nature.[42] By contrast, the Hegelian presents second nature as a space undergoing constant change. It thus seems that the Hegelian conception relativizes rationality. The Kantian stresses that rationality always underlies and precedes human practice and thus suspects that the Hegelian misses this point.

In other words, the Kantian suspects that the Hegelian conception fails to grasp the normative aspect of rationality and that only the Kantian conception is able to do justice to it by explaining rationality as something without which no human activity is possible. But the Kantian conception relies on the problematic assumption that one necessarily ends up with a relativist account of rationality if one allows that rationality can change over time. Kant's critique of Hume was similar and it led him to develop his own transcendental understanding of rationality.

But once again, the Kantian's argument turns against itself. If rationality is understood as a framework of human existence that does not change, one is left incapable of explaining how rationality has any contact with the world in the first place. Along with that, one is then compelled to conceive of rationality in a relativist fashion. After all, if rationality is a form that is stable through time, it is by definition not affected by how the world is. If the world were different, rational structures would nevertheless be the same. In this sense, the Kantian conception takes rationality to be indifferent to the way the world is constituted. If this is true, then one has to explain (as Kant does) how rationality forms the world; one has to avoid taking the world as something that itself shapes rationality. This Kantian move brings us to the second part of the argument: If one claims that rationality forms the world, then one takes a perspective on the world that is relative to rationality.[43] One ends up saying something that one absolutely did not want to say: A rational stance towards the world is dependent on a rationality that forms the world.

In contrast to the Kantian, the Hegelian does not take rationality as an immobile background of human practices. But that does not mean that the Hegelian advocates relativism. Rather, it is Hegel's aim to overcome the problems inherent in the Kantian understanding of rationality. The lesson he takes from Kant is that rationality has to be explained through the human being's relation with first nature, or the world. The Kantian conception runs the danger of conceiving of human practices as a frictionless spinning in the void (to use McDowell's evocative phrase). In contrast, the Hegelian conception aims to understand rationality as constitutive for human practices and as something that reflects the human's interactions with first nature or the world. And it contends that this requires that we do not understand rationality as being static. For the Hegelian, rationality is not a set of fixed rules that is applied to various situations, events, or objects. According to Hegel, rationality is developed in correlation with practices within the world. This does not mean that rationality is relative and that different forms of rationality proliferate. Rather, constant renewal creates a context that has universal validity while nonetheless being bound up with historical specificities. At this point, it is important to remember that the Hegelian conception takes self-transformations as being bound to an open future. Such an open future correlates the process by which human beings form their self-understanding as thinking creatures with the way they think and act within

---

41 This makes it clear that the distinction most prominent in McDowell's thinking, namely that between the myth of the given and the coherence theory (cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, ch. 1), is a problematic one. It makes it appear as if the limitation of the human being has to be thought of in such a way that it does not entail the idea of principle limits. But this is a consequence we should not accept. The human being is limited in a principle way. We can avoid the consequences of this account, which McDowell justifiably criticizes, by not explaining the limitation in terms of givenness.

42 A similar picture is provided by Robert Pippin by his explanation of how we as a collective institute the norms by which we are bound. Even though Pippin suggests that he relies on Hegel, his picture is deeply Kantian in spirit. See Pippin, "Recognition and Reconciliation."

43 For an instructive explanation of Hegel's criticism of Kant in this respect see Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, 70–97.

the world. A preliminary summary of the Hegelian's answer is thus: Rationality is the process of orienting one's practices towards a self-understanding of oneself as a thinking creature, a self-understanding that one forms in correlation to the way one thinks and acts within the world.

The temporal dimension of the Hegelian's notion of rationality becomes clearer when one considers the retroactive structure of their assertion that rationality is bound to the future. The temporally conditioned way human beings develop an understanding of themselves is a series of determinations through which they make reference to the world. But this exploration is never finished *hic et nunc*. It is a process that is always oriented towards the future. Through this process, the self-understandings in question are bound to what they will turn out to be, and what they will turn out to be is and will be informed by the subject's (future) interactions with how the world is. Because they result out of the process of self-transformation, the self-understandings are determined by what they will have been in the future.[44] In this way, first nature or the world itself becomes part of how human beings determine how they understand themselves. Because they are situated in an ongoing process, human beings' self-understandings are never fixed. Their specific content is bound up with their future revisions. These revisions will show the truth of what the self-understandings are. Thus, a second summary of a Hegelian concept of rationality might look like this: Rationality is the process by which practices within the world are given an orientation by self-understandings which are – through an ongoing process of self-transformation – bound to an open future.

Such is the Hegelian's counter to the Kantian's objections. Significant for this plea for a Hegelian conception of second nature is that, according to it, rationality has to be understood as a reflective, critical enterprise.[45] It is crucial for the Hegelian conception that second nature, as a process that is bound to an open future, is not secure. It can always congeal, be alienated from itself, or be interrupted. These possibilities imbue reflection and critique with a specific uncertainty defined by the fact that the success of reflection and critique is not guaranteed by the form of rationality itself. Reflective practices and critical practices are precarious in themselves. Like second nature, they can always fail. Thus, to develop practices that open up room for reflection and critique is one of the tasks that our second nature confronts us with.[46]

References

Adorno, Theodor W. "The Idea of Natural History." *Telos* 60 (1984): 111–124.

Bauer, Nathan. "A Peculiar Intuition: Kant's Conceptualist Account of Perception." *Inquiry* 55, no. 3 (2012): 215–237.

Bertram, Georg W. *Hegel's "Phänomenologie des Geistes." Ein systematischer Kommentar*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2017.

Boyle, Brandon. "The Bildungsroman after McDowell." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 2 (2011): 173–184.

Brandom, Robert. "The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 1 (2007): 127–150.

Griffith, Aaron M. "Perception and the Categories: A Conceptualist Reading of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason." *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2012): 193–222.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T.M. Knox. 2 Vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

---

44 It is illuminating to contrast this Hegelian notion of self-understanding with the concept of self-conceptions that Robert Brandom attributes to Hegel. Brandom states that self-conceptions have to be understood according to the model of ritual samurai practices. Since self-conceptions are the essence of what a human being is, it can, according to Brandom, possibly be necessary to sacrifice one's life for what one is (see Brandom, "The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution," 129–30). But Hegel does not claim that self-conceptions are the essence of a human being. Rather, his position says that the human being has no essence and that self-understandings are never completed. Brandom makes it appear as if self-conceptions are something human beings can dispose of. This stands contrary to Hegel's conception, according to which self-understandings are constitutive elements of processes of self-transformation.

45 Brandon Boyle convincingly argues that McDowell's invocation of second nature is in need of an explanation of *Bildung*, which can be provided by relying on the *Bildungsroman*. I think that Boyle's argument teaches us that the Hegelian conception can help us understand that reflection and critique are important aspects of rationality, but that they cannot be taken for granted. To develop practices that open room for reflection and critique is one of the tasks that our second nature confronts us with. See Boyle, "The *Bildungsroman* after McDowell."

46 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on a previous version of the text and to Adam Bresnahan for helpful revisions of it.

DE GRUYTER

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* (Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, part III), translated by W. Wallace and A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, edited and translated by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller. Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962.

Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. In *Philosophical Writings*, edited and translated by Michael N. Forster, 65–164. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Larmore, Charles. "Attending to Reasons." In *Reading McDowell*, edited by Nicholas Smith, 193–208. New York: Routledge, 2002.

McDowell, John. "Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism." In *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, edited by Jeff Malpass, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher, 173-194. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.

McDowell, John. "How Not to Read 'Philosophical Investigations': Brandom's Wittgenstein." In *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays*, 96–111. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

McDowell, John. "Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint." In *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, 90–107. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

McDowell, John. "Two Sorts of Naturalism." In *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 167–197. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998.

Menke, Christoph. "Hegel's Theory of Second Nature." *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013): 31–49.

Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Pippin, Robert. *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Pippin, Robert. "Recognition and Reconciliation. Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology." In *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen, 57–78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Pippin, Robert. "What is the Question for which Hegel's Theory of Recognition is the Answer?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2000): 155–172.

Sally Sedgwick. *Hegel's Critique of Kant: From Dichotomy to Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Wood, Allen W. "Kant and the Problem of Human Nature." In *Essays on Kant's Anthropology*, edited by Brian Jacobs and Patrick Kain, 38–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Wright, Crispin. "Human Nature?" In *Reading McDowell*, edited by Nicholas Smith, 140–159. New York: Routledge, 2002.