

Three Sorts of Naturalism

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1.

My title, obviously, alludes to the title of John McDowell's well-known and influential paper 'Two Sorts of Naturalism'. His paper first appeared in a Festschrift for Philippa Foot, and it opens with a tribute to her:

Philippa Foot has long urged the attractions of ethical naturalism. I applaud the negative part of her point, which is to reject various sorts of subjectivism and supernaturalist rationalism. But I doubt whether we can understand a positive naturalism in the right way without first rectifying a constriction that the concept of nature is liable to undergo in our thinking. Without such preliminaries, what we make of ethical naturalism will not be the radical and satisfying alternative to Mrs Foot's targets that naturalism can be. Mrs Foot's writings do not pay much attention to the concept of nature in its own right, and this leaves a risk that her naturalism may seem to belong to this less satisfying variety. I hope an attempt to explain this will be an appropriate token of friendship and admiration. (MVR: 167).

McDowell here sets the scene for his discussion by first distinguishing between two sorts of non-naturalism in ethics—subjectivism and supernaturalist rationalism—which he follows Philippa Foot in rejecting. They could both be characterized by their insistence that there is a fundamental discontinuity between the ethical and the natural. At a crucial point, they claim, any attempt to account for ethical values or norms will have to appeal to something in a realm which is not of the same ontological or epistemological order as the natural, either because ethical values or norms are man-made in a way that make them independent of and somehow secondary to and less real or less objective than ordinary natural facts, (as in forms of value-nihilism, anti-realism, subjectivism, relativism, projectivism, error-theory, quasi-realism, non-cognitivism, emotivism, prescriptivism, voluntarism, conventionalism, existentialism etc.) or because at least some ethical values or norms are eternal, absolute or divine in a way that makes them independent of and somehow prior to and more real or more objective than ordinary natural facts (as in forms of Platonism, absolutism, rationalism, intuitionism, divine command theories etc.). An accusation against naturalists for committing a naturalistic fallacy may be issued both from below and from above, as it were, claiming that naturalists take ethical values or norms

to be either more or less firm or objective than they really are. Ethical values and norms are used to measure human conduct and there is a pull towards either regarding the measuring rod as something of extraordinary rigidity and stability or regarding it as a matter of personal engagement capable of motivating but ultimately based on mere subjective attitude or more or less parochial convention.

McDowell recognizes the force of both these pulls but finds it necessary to resist them. This brings him within the broad scope of naturalism. An ethical naturalist is someone who insists on a fundamental continuity between the ethical and the natural. Ethical values or norms can and should be accounted for within the realm of nature and in terms of or based on ordinary natural facts. There are several forms of naturalism, however, and it is a main aim for McDowell to argue against one specific form of naturalism which is very common in modern philosophy, but as he sees it, based on an unduly restricted conception of nature and bound to misrepresent the ethical. In the paper, this sort of naturalism is referred to as 'neo-Humean naturalism' (MVR: 183, 194) or 'empiricistic naturalism' (MVR: 186) and in many places in *Mind and World* (MW) as 'bald naturalism' or 'naturalism of the realm of law' or 'naturalism of disenchanting nature'. This sort of naturalism takes it for granted that reality is 'exhausted by the natural world, in the sense of the world as the natural sciences are capable of revealing it to us' (MVR: 173) but claims that the ethical can and must be understood as having a place or being rooted in the natural world even as it is thus understood in abstraction from any specifically human concern. Putative ethical reasons for action need to be grounded in facts of the realm of natural law in order to be in good standing, and at least some ethical reasons for action can be thus grounded. All we need by way of ethics can be grounded in facts about the natural world as 'the province of scientific understanding' (MVR: 182), including, e.g. facts about 'what animals of a particular species need in order to do well in the sort of life they naturally live' (MVR: 176). (This is actually a form of naturalism that Philippa Foot comes quite close to exemplifying.) This form of naturalism, in fact, has the same narrow conception of nature as many subjectivist non-naturalists but differs from them in claiming that an understanding of the animal side of human nature can give us sufficient direct ethical guidance without the additional intervention of some personal act of prescribing or endorsing which can be performed or withheld at will.

McDowell regards this sort of naturalism and the underlying conception of nature (which it shares with much subjective non-naturalism) as unduly restricted, and as a dubious philosophical response to the rise of modern science, a piece of 'shallow metaphysics' (MVR: 182) or 'philistine scientism' (MVR: 72), and he argues that we need not restrict ourselves to a conception of nature which is purged of everything specifically human.

A scientific conception of reality is eminently open to dispute. When we ask the metaphysical question whether reality is what science can find

out about, we cannot, without begging the question, restrict the materials for an answer to those that science can countenance. (MVR: 72)

He insists that this point 'does not involve debunking the scientific way of understanding nature' (MVR: 187). There is nothing wrong with the natural sciences. They reveal ever-deeper insights into the workings of the natural world. Their insights are, however, distorted if they are taken not only to reveal something about the natural world but to define it or to exhaust what it really contains, thus excluding from the natural world all that the natural sciences have initially disregarded in order to get going.

It is crucial for McDowell that his criticism of this—his first—sort of naturalism should not be seen as implying any kind of super-naturalism. He therefore argues for an alternative position that is a sort of naturalism, too, but in which the problematic restriction in the conception of nature has been rectified. This is his second sort of naturalism that he believes has an equal or even a better right to the name 'naturalism' than that of his opponents. This intellectual investment in a broader sense of naturalism is an explicit theme throughout much of his work, not just in ethics, but also in the philosophy of mind and in other areas of philosophy, prominently so in *MW* and in 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind' (McDowell 2004). Reality may indeed be exhausted by the natural world, provided, however, that this is understood in a richer sense of the natural world that includes all our human potentials including those necessary for becoming ethically virtuous or, indeed, for becoming a scientist. McDowell refers to a naturalism based on this richer conception of nature as an 'acceptable naturalism' (MVR: 197), a 'relaxed naturalism' (MW: 89) and a 'liberal naturalism' (McDowell 2004: 98). He often introduces it by reflecting on Aristotle's account of the virtues, and he refers to it as 'Greek naturalism' (MVR: 174), 'Aristotelian naturalism' (MVR: 196), 'naturalism of second nature' (MW: 86), or 'naturalized platonism' (MW: 91). The richer conception of nature behind this sort of naturalism is also called a 'partial re-enchantment of nature' (MW: 97) though there is clearly meant to be nothing supernatural about it.

Basically, I believe I am in rather deep agreement with McDowell, and I should like to think of myself as joining in the search for ways of formulating and arguing for an acceptable, radical and satisfying sort of ethical naturalism based on a not unduly restricted conception of nature—a search that his work helps along, but which is certainly as yet unfinished and probably open-ended. I shall do so by paying some further attention to the concept of *nature* in its own right in order to raise some questions about how, exactly, McDowell's own, second, sort of ethical naturalism is to be understood. How does he rectify the restriction that the concept of nature is liable to undergo in our present day thinking? How broad does he take the concept of nature to be? I shall be distinguishing between *restricted* and *unrestricted* conceptions of nature. I shall further show that restricted conceptions of nature can come in quite different, often competing versions like materialist or idealist, empiricist or rationalist, subjectivist or

objectivist conceptions of nature. I have chosen to illustrate this by reference to explicit discussions in Plato and Aristotle of materialist conceptions of nature quite similar to the conceptions of nature underlying bald naturalism. In both Plato and Aristotle the outcome of the discussion seems to be an idealist conception of nature that is still a restricted conception. On this basis I shall define three broad sorts of naturalism in ethics: 1) materialist naturalism, 2) idealist naturalism, and 3) unrestricted or absolute naturalism. (It could just as well have been 1) empiricist, 2) rationalist and 3) unrestricted naturalism, but the explicit reference to Plato and Aristotle will allow me to comment on McDowell's credentials to titles like Greek naturalism.) I shall then go on to discuss how to place McDowell's position in relation to schemes like this, given that no form of ethical non-naturalism could be an option for him. Is his position a sort of materialist naturalism, restricted, but somehow less restricted than bald naturalism? Is it an idealist (basically Platonic or Aristotelian) sort of restricted naturalism? Is it an open, unrestricted sort of naturalism? Or are there other options?

I shall introduce my three sorts of naturalism via some elements of a general analysis of the ordinary modern use of the term 'nature' (section 2) and a brief discussion of texts by Plato and Aristotle (section 3). In section 4 I shall then be arguing that nothing short of a completely unrestricted or absolute naturalism would be the acceptable, radical and satisfying sort of naturalism for McDowell's purposes. It is, however, by no means clear that this is his preferred position, but I shall argue that he faces some difficulties on his own terms if he directly rejects that it is. As a minor point, I shall be arguing that McDowell's references to 'Greek naturalism', 'Aristotelian naturalism', 'naturalised Platonism', 'naturalism of second nature', 'relaxed naturalism', 'liberal naturalism', or 'partial re-enchancement of nature' may help loosen the grip of certain reductive forms of naturalism but that they do not really point us in the right direction when it comes to the understanding of a positive naturalism providing a convincing alternative to bald naturalism.

2.

Let us begin by noting that the apparently simple structure of super-naturalism/naturalism/subjectivism has the obvious terminological problem that it involves two rather different discontinuities between the natural and something extra-natural, two discontinuities that are difficult to keep in focus at the same time. However sharply a subjectivist distinguishes between the natural on the one hand and the ethical as man-made, artificial, projected, conventional or whatever on the other, his account of the ethical will nevertheless be naturalistic in the sense that it is surely not meant to appeal to something super-natural. Even the most ardent emotivist anti-naturalist can be seen as some kind of (bald) naturalist in ethics. It is no accident that Hume is regarded both as an arch-naturalist and an arch-anti-naturalist, and that he goes out of his way to stress that in a certain

sense nothing is more natural for human beings than the artificial virtues (*THN*: III.II.I). Similarly, however much a super-naturalist emphasizes the exalted status of the roots of the ethical, her account will nevertheless be naturalistic in the sense that it does not see the ethical as man-made and artificial. The whole natural law tradition in ethics with its insistence on the existence of a moral law that is not of human making and yet humanly accessible bears witness to this. It is no accident that Thomas Aquinas is regarded both as a naturalist and a super-naturalist in ethics. On a suitable conception of the natural, there may thus be something naturalistic even about an account of the ethical that is explicitly non-naturalistic on another conception of the natural.

This is a terminological issue, but it is not easy to resolve simply by choosing one's definition of 'nature' and then sticking to it. No account of naturalism should forget the fact that 'nature' is, as Raymond Williams puts it, 'perhaps the most complex word in the language' (Williams 1981: 184), or as Hume puts it, a word 'than which there is none more ambiguous and equivocal' (*THN*: III.II.II.). In this section I shall try to give a somewhat systematic overview of some of this complexity that simply cannot be reduced by philosophical *fiat*.

One general source of ambiguity is that we use the concept of nature in two rather different ways when we are talking about a) the nature of something—e.g. my nature, human nature, the nature of a certain mineral, something being in the nature of things—and when we are talking of b) nature as a realm of its own, the world of nature. Every *x* has a nature (regarded as something internal to *x*) and every *x* has a place in nature or in relation to nature (regarded as something external to *x* whether *x* is seen as included in nature or not). The understanding of a) is basic to the understanding of b) so let us begin by considering what it is for an *x* to have a nature, postponing the question of how the same word can be used both of that which is your innermost self and at the same time, and even in the same sentence, of certain parts of your surroundings where you may or may not choose to go for a walk. Perhaps it is by your very nature that you are a lover of nature.

First, it is worth noting that we may talk about the nature of absolutely everything, any *x* whatsoever. Individual human beings, mankind, animals, plants, things, materials, properties, relations, events, processes, concepts, ideas—all can be said to have a nature. Even something as elusive as the Japanese reception of Heidegger's philosophy has its own nature. Indeed, it is a deep root of ambiguity that we can talk about the nature of art, law, language, culture, morality, normativity, history, civilization, spirit, mind, God, or nothingness even if we otherwise regard these as non-natural, that is, as not belonging to nature as a realm. There is no contradiction in talking about the nature of the unnatural, the super-natural, or the non-natural, just as it is an open question what the nature of the natural is. Our concept of nature has what we could call an over-arching nature: Which ever way we distinguish between a realm of nature and other realms, items on both sides inevitably have a nature.

Everything, any *x*, can be said to have a nature, but it is a further source of ambiguity that any *x* has both its own individual nature and the nature of the

species or kinds it may be seen as belonging to. The nature of *x* is both what is special about this *x* and what makes this *x* one of the *x*'s as opposed to the *y*'s. When *x* is defined *per genus et differentiam* both the genus and the differentiating characteristic and their combination could be taken to express what is the nature of *x*. Our word 'nature' is derived from a Latin word for birth, conception, coming into being. Your nature is something you have from your very beginning both as an individual and as a member of your kin, gender, nation, general kind. (Incidentally, the last five words all have the same etymological root as 'nature'.) Your nature is what differentiates you from all others. It is your own unique and characteristic way of being; your special physiological, physical constitution; your unique genetic code; the deepest and most individuating layers in your personality; the unmistakable tone of your voice. On the other hand, your nature is also what you have in common with certain others. Your nature exemplifies human nature. It takes your sort to make all sorts, but basically you are like the rest of us who each have our own individual nature while sharing in human nature. Our common human nature again is both what is special and what is generic about us as a kind. Human nature is what differentiates us from the animals and the plants. By nature we are rational beings. Our human nature, however, is also that in virtue of which we belong to the animal kingdom and to the living organisms. By nature we are mammals. We may thus use the concept of nature to differentiate rather than include, but also to include rather than differentiate. And we may use the concept of nature to express that differentiation and inclusion should not be seen as incompatible.

Everything, any *x*, can be said to have a nature, but what is it that *x* has, when *x* is said to have a nature? We may try to elucidate this by considering some of the expressions that are often used to explicate the meaning of 'nature'. The nature of *x* is the essence of *x*, the constitution of *x* out of its more elementary constituents, the defining characteristics of *x*, that about *x* which explains how *x* behaves, that which *x* is ordinarily, that which *x* is in and of itself prior to and independent of external interference. These common formulae, however, do not mean exactly the same, and they may not be consistent with each other on all interpretations. Terms like 'essence', 'constitution' or 'defining characteristics' are not obviously more perspicuous than the term 'nature' itself. The nature of *x* is the tautological explanation of the behaviour or conduct of *x*, but what is demanded and what suffices as explanation under given circumstances may vary enormously. Talking about the nature of *x* as that which *x* is in and by itself prior to and independent of external interference raises a lot of questions about what may count as external (human, divine, unusual?) interference, questions that have no resolution on a conceptual level. All such circumscriptions take the nature of *x* to be something about *x* that is somehow primary rather than secondary, original rather than later achieved, basic rather than superstructural, necessary rather than accidental or normal rather than extraordinary. Again, these do not mean exactly the same thing, and they are all subject to different interpretations. The primary, for example, may be regarded as separable from and opposed to the secondary, or the primary may be regarded as permeating and allowing the secondary, so that

the secondary is an expression of the primary, and similarly with the other contrasts. Again, we find a conceptual pattern where 'the nature of *x*' may be used both to mark a contrast and to bridge that contrast.

The nature of *x* is something primary, original, basic, necessary, or normal about *x*. Rather different aspects of *x* may, however, with some right be regarded as primary, original, basic, necessary, or normal. The idea of nature as essence may point in an idealist direction, the idea of nature as constitution out of more elementary constituents may point in a materialist direction, whereas the idea of nature as the defining characteristics may point in a formal or rationalistic direction. Your nature may be seen either as something mental, a matter of deep layers of your individual psychology (whether instinctive, emotional or personal), or as something material, a matter of anonymous generic physiology, genetics or physics. Taken this way, these are *contrasting* conceptions of the nature of *x* prioritizing something we know about *x* over something else we know about *x*.

Our concept of nature, however, also allows for a conception of the nature of *x* identifying it with absolutely everything that is true of *x*. All we can come to know about any possible aspect of *x* is knowledge of the nature of *x*; nothing about *x* is so inessential, so secondary, or so extraordinary that it does not belong to the nature of *x*. It would be wrong to leave anything out. The nature of *x* is the unity in all possible knowledge about *x*. One could, of course, ask if this identification of the nature of *x* and the totality of all that can be known about *x* is really a conception of the *nature* of *x*? Isn't the nature of *x* of conceptual necessity something primary, original, basic, necessary or normal about *x*? Yes, but here is a straightforward sense in which the totality of all that can be known about *x* is, indeed, primary, original, basic, necessary and ordinary relative to any differentiation within our knowledge of *x* between primary and secondary, original and later achieved, basic and super-structural, necessary and accidental, or ordinary and extraordinary elements. This would be a *non-contrasting* conception of the nature of *x* open to any future additional information about *x*.

A further source of ambiguity that I shall just mention and then leave aside has to do with the ways in which normativity is attached to conceptions of the nature of *x*. In contrasting conceptions the primary, the original, the basic, the necessary and the normal are often put on the positive side. But not always so; the primary may be the primitive, the original may be the old fashioned, the basic may be the base, the necessary may be the unfree, the ordinary may be the boring. We may use the concept of nature normatively to express a rather low opinion of our nature as merely animal and other than our true self, as in the thought that 'our nature is what we are in this world to rise above', which a Victorian lady has been quoted as saying. We may also use it to express a rather high opinion of our nature as deeply personal and identical with our true—but endangered—self, as in the thought that 'even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; (. . .); until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow;' to quote another Victorian, John Stuart Mill (Mill 1977: 265). We can, however, also use the concept of nature non-normatively to express the thought that our nature is what we cannot help exemplify. We are by nature just

the way we are. This non-contrasting, non-normative usage, however, has the normative edge to it that there must be something misleading about both of the quoted Victorian thoughts. On this conception our nature is something we can neither raise above nor lose.

To sum up: Our use of the term 'the nature of *x*' displays a highly complex combination of excluding and including, contrasting and non-contrasting, restricted and unrestricted uses. The excluding, contrasting and restricted uses may be used to mark many different differences. There is no single contrast that is inevitably being appealed to.

We come now to contexts where we talk about nature in general, the realm of nature. We can approach this by replacing '*x*' with 'everything' or 'the world' in the question 'What is the nature of *x*?' This brings us to questions like: What is the essence, the constitution, the defining characteristic of all there is? What explains how the whole world behaves? How would the world be in and of itself, prior to and independent of any external interference? What are the primary, original, basic, necessary and normal traits of the world we live in? We can then make a conceptual shift from talking about the nature of the world to talking about nature as those parts or aspects of the world that we regard as belonging to the nature of the world. A contrasting and restricted conception of the nature of the world would then identify nature with certain parts or sides of the world. On the other hand, a non-contrasting and unrestricted conception of the nature of *x* would identify nature with absolutely everything there is. (This conceptual move would give the promised reconstruction of how the same word can come to be used both of that which is your innermost self and of certain parts of your surroundings where you may or may not choose to take a walk, and in which you may or may not be seen as included.)

In ordinary language 'nature' or 'the natural world' is actually understood in a quite bewildering number of different ways which illustrates the different ways in which different parts or aspects of the world in its totality are somehow taken to be external to or other than nature. We can initially distinguish between at least 8 different ways of conceiving of nature as a realm in contrast with other realms:

1. The world prior to or unaffected by human, cultural or social intervention.
2. The world prior to or not under agriculture—the wilderness, the jungle, the desert, as opposed to the cultivated world of the farmland, villages and towns.
3. The world prior to or not subjected to urbanization—the rural, the countryside, the landscape, the outdoors as opposed to life in the cities and indoors.
4. The world prior to or not subjected to industrialization—the organic, the 'green' as opposed to the synthetic and high-tech.
5. The material or physical or external world as opposed to the mental or psychological or inner world.

6. The empirical world as opposed to the intelligible world of the abstract, logical, or mathematical.
7. The earthly world as opposed to the heavenly world—the created (immanent) world as opposed to its transcendent creator.
8. The ordinary world as opposed to a world of the extra-ordinary and mystical.

These are all different versions of restricted conceptions of nature as a realm. They contrast nature with other realms somehow outside or independent of nature. The four first conceptions implicitly identify the world with the surface of the Earth, and then divide this world up according to whether or how much it has been changed by human, cultural, social and industrial activity. Something about human beings and the parts of their surroundings over which they exercise a high degree of control is seen as contrasted with the parts of their surroundings over which they have no or little control. On the first conception there may not be much nature left on earth if one takes the unintended consequences of emissions to the oceans and the atmosphere into account. On the second conception there is still some nature left but increasingly in the form of 'nature parks' or 'national parks' and subject to a fairly benign human control and protection. The third conception is probably the most common understanding of nature in the Western World today (at least in Europe). Here, nature includes the farmland rather than what is left surrounding it, and all plants and animals whether wild or domesticated. The fourth conception allow us to see exquisite cultural products like planed wood, roof tiles, leather, wool, cotton- and silk fabrics as natural materials. The fifth conception takes the human mind to be set over and against the external world of which it receives information and forms its own understanding. The sixth conception takes formal and abstract entities to form a world of their own. On the seventh conception human life and thinking are included in nature but contrasted with a sphere of a higher order of reality with which the human soul may have an affinity both during life and after death. The eighth conception regards nature as law governed and predictable as opposed to phenomena explicitly regarded as defying or being contrary to the ordinary laws of nature.

On top of all those ways of marking contrasts within the totality by help of the term 'nature' our ordinary language also allows a conception of nature as all there is. Such a ninth conception of nature would be an unrestricted conception. It would express the idea that there is one world only, and that that world is the realm of nature, which is taken to include the cultural, artificial, mental, abstract and whatever else there may prove to be. There are no realms above or beyond nature. To be is to be in nature and to be in continuity with everything else in nature. Even the greatest and deepest differences are differences within nature rather than differences between nature and something else.

The list of possible conceptions of nature as a realm could be made longer or be differently structured, but it suffices to show that it does not go without saying what the realm of nature is. Or rather, it shows that it does indeed go without saying but in so many different ways, that some further saying is needed if we want to make it

somewhat clearer what we are talking about. On the conceptual level it is systematically unclear whether no human activities, some human activities or all human activities belong to nature as a realm. There is no nature *tout court*.

3.

I shall return to the relevance of all of this for the understanding of McDowell's own sort of naturalism, but first I shall go into some detail concerning the philosophical use of the Greek concept *physis* (which is the direct etymological root of our 'physics' and 'physiology' but standardly translated by 'nature' and highly influential in the formation of both the philosophical and ordinary uses of this concept which is itself derived via Latin from a completely different etymological root). I shall begin by going back to an explicit discussion of *physis* by the old Plato in his last work, *Laws*. I shall also include a brief account of Aristotle's official definitions of *physis* in the *Physics*. It may seem a detour, but it may help us understand the peculiar, hyper-complex logic of our present day concept of nature, and I shall, as mentioned, need it in order to define materialist and idealist naturalism and also to examine to what extent the reference to Greek naturalism can carry the weight placed on it by McDowell.

In *Laws*, Book X, the question of the right understanding of *physis* comes up during a discussion between three elderly gentlemen about how crimes of sacrilege should be dealt with in the laws of a good, but not utopian, polis. In earlier times, they agree, things were easier: every one was brought up to fear the gods, so sacrilege hardly ever occurred, and there was no doubt about how it should be dealt with if it did. Recently, however, written literature has been produced by wise or clever men claiming that there are no gods. These views appeal to the young who thereby come to question not only the notion of sacrilege but also the whole divine foundation of the laws and the established social order. Plato's spokesman—who is here not Socrates but an anonymous Athenian—explains this dangerous modern doctrine—'a very grievous unwisdom which is reputed to be the height of wisdom'—to one of his interlocutors, the Cretan, Clinias. I shall quote at some length.

Ath.: It is stated by some that all things which are coming into existence, or have or will come into existence, do so partly by nature, partly by art, and partly owing to chance.

(...)

Ath.: I will explain more clearly. Fire and water and earth and air, they say, all exist by nature and chance, and none of them by art; and by means of these, which are wholly inanimate, the bodies which come next—those, namely, of the earth, sun, moon and stars—have been brought into existence. It is by chance all these elements move, by the interplay of the respective forces, and according as they meet together and combine fittingly,—hot with cold, dry with moist, soft with hard,

and all such necessary mixtures as result from the chance combination of these opposites,—in this way and by these means they have brought into being the whole Heaven and all that is in the Heaven, and all animals, too, and plants (. . .); and all this as they assert, not owing to reason, nor to any god or art, but owing as we have said to nature and chance. As a later product of these, art comes later; and it, being mortal itself and of mortal birth, begets later playthings which share but little in truth, being images of a sort akin to the arts themselves—images such as painting begets, and music, and the arts which accompany these. (. . .). Politics too, as they say, shares to a small extent in nature, but mostly in art; and in like manner all legislation, which is based on untrue assumptions, is due, not to nature, but to art.

Clin.: What do you mean?

Ath.: The first statement my dear sir, which these people make about the gods is that they exist by art and not by nature,—by certain legal conventions which differ from place to place, according as each tribe agreed when forming their laws. They assert, moreover, that there is one class of things beautiful by nature and another class beautiful by convention; while as to things just, they do not exist at all by nature, but men are constantly altering them, and whatever alteration they make at any time is at that time authoritative, though it owes its existence to art and the laws, and not in any way to nature. All these, my friends, are views which young people imbibe from men of science, both prose-writers and poets, who maintain that the height of justice is to succeed by force; whence it comes that the young people are afflicted with a plague of impiety, as though the gods were not such as the law commands us to conceive them; and because of this, factions also arise when these teachers attract them towards the life that is right 'according to nature', which consists in being master over the rest in reality instead of being a slave to others according to legal convention. (Plato *Laws*: 888 E–890 B)

The 'modern' scientists here discussed distinguish three types of causes by which something can be brought into existence, nature (*physis*), chance (*tyche*) and human intervention or art (*techné*). To come to exist by nature (*physei*) is to come to exist by inner force or necessity. Each of the four elements fire, air, water and earth possess such an inner force that determines their way of being and their effects on each other. The inner force of the elements in combination with blind chance accounts for the existence of many things in the world. Together they have brought about the existence of the sun, the moon, the earth, the plants and the animals. No intelligent design, divine or human, was involved. Human beings like other animals come to exist by nature and chance, but they have the special power to make new things come into existence by the help of art, law (*nomos*) or nurture (*melete*). The products of these could not have been created by nature and chance alone. That which exists by nature, however, is ontologically primary, original, basic, necessary and normal relative to that which has a

secondary and dependent form of existence because it owes its existence not to its own inner force but to human intervention. Human beings may even use their imagination to create patterns of thought that are quite independent of what exists by nature. They may thus invent a whole realm of gods and deities, shown to be merely illusory by being different from society to society. Conventional justice, similarly, does not exist by nature but merely by human invention of laws—often based on appeal to illusory deities or other bad arguments with no proper reference to what really exists by nature. Conventional ethics is thus wholly man-made and without true reality and objectivity. An unconventional ethos of self-aggrandisement, however, would be ‘according to nature’ (*kata physin*).

What we have here is a completely disenchanted and severely restricted conception of nature excluding not only anything supernatural but much of the human, cultural and social as well. This conception of nature is quite close to the restricted conception of nature behind both subjectivist anti-naturalism and bald naturalism in ethics, so it is underlying the first sort of naturalism both on McDowell’s and my reckoning. Of course there are enormous differences between the science that is modern today and the science modern around 350 BC, but I believe we should not underestimate the importance of the availability of such ancient materialism as a live inspiration for the advance of modern science. The possibility of restricting the natural to elementary material forces as governed by blind necessity and chance, and the further possibility of construing the ethical as specifically human and of a precarious ontological and epistemological status potentially undermining its authority in social life has clearly been present since antiquity and has been formative in the early history of our concept of nature. Of course such a restriction took on much greater respectability and became much more influential with the success of modern science, but there is a conceptual continuity that I see reasons to stress, rather than to disregard. At least the example shows that it is not as if all Greeks just had an innocent unrestricted or broad conception of nature that we could simply return to after rectifying the restrictions of a specifically modern conception of nature. This will become clearer as we go on.

The Athenian sets out to refute this dangerous doctrine. He does so by focusing on the concept of *psyche*, which has not been explicitly mentioned so far.

Ath.: It appears that the person who makes these statements holds fire, water, earth and air to be the first of all things, and that it is precisely to these things that he gives the name of ‘nature’, while soul he asserts to be a later product therefrom.

(...)

Ath.: As regards the soul, my comrade, nearly all men appear to be ignorant of its real nature and its potency, and ignorant not only of other facts about it, but of its origin especially,—how that it is one of the first existences, and prior to all bodies, and that it more than anything else is what governs all the changes and modifications of bodies. And if this is really the state of the case, must not things which are akin to soul be

necessarily prior in origin to things which belong to body, seeing that soul is older than body?

Clin.: Necessarily.

Ath.: Then opinion and reflection and thought and art and law will be prior to things hard and soft and heavy and light; and further, the works and actions that are great and primary will be those of art, while those that are natural, and nature itself,—which they wrongly call by this name—will be secondary, and will derive their origin from art and reason.

Clinias: How are they wrong?

Athenian: By 'nature' they intend to indicate production of things primary; but if soul shall be shown to have been produced first (not fire or air), but soul first and foremost,—it would most truly be described as a superlatively "natural" existence. Such is the state of the case, provided that one can prove that soul is older than body, but not otherwise. (Plato *Laws*: 891C–892C)

This last passage is crucial for the argument and highly interesting. The Athenian doesn't just leave the concept *physis* to the 'men of science'. He does not first accept their conception of nature and then confront them with the claim that there is something extra-natural—the soul or the gods—which they have disregarded and which is in fact prior to nature. No. Like McDowell the Athenian is eager to have nature on his side. He therefore challenges the scientists' right to restrict the term 'nature' to the soulless, partly necessary and partly accidental combinations of the elements. As he sees it, the common ground between them is a definition of nature as that which is primary in existence because caused by its own inner force and not by something else. The men of science claim that it is something material, the four elements, that fulfil this definition, but if the Athenian can show that soul is primary in existence, he shall also have shown that soul has the better right to the name 'nature'. Notice that the soul is not being introduced as *super-natural*, but as *superlatively natural*, that is, even more natural (primary, original, basic, necessary and normal) than what some, or perhaps even most, people call nature.

The Athenian's conception, however, depends on the possibility of proving that soul is older than body. Here follows a long argument the upshot of which is this:

Ath.: What is the definition of that object which has for its name 'soul'? Can we give it any other definition than that stated just now—'the motion able to move itself'?

Clin.: Do you assert that 'self-movement' is the definition of that very same substance which has 'soul' as the name we universally apply to it?

Ath.: That is what I assert. And if this be really so, do we still complain that it has not been sufficiently proved that soul is identical with the prime origin and motion of what is, has been, and shall be, and of all that

is opposite to these, seeing that it has been plainly shown to be the cause of all change and motion in all things?

Clin.: We make no such complaint; on the contrary, it has been proved most sufficiently that soul is of all things the oldest, since it is the first principle of motion.

(...)

Ath.: Truly and finally, then, it would be a most veracious and complete statement to say that we find soul to be prior to body, and body secondary and posterior, soul governing and body being governed according to the ordinance of nature.

Clin.: Yes, most veracious. (Plato *Laws*: 896A–C)

This, I take it, is pretty rampant Platonism but clearly presented as an account of the soul as natural because primary in existence and the only thing with the inner power to make itself and other things move and change. Mind is prior to world. What the men of science call nature the Athenian might call dependent existence or “second nature” relative to the soul-like ‘first nature’. Both parties to the discussion have their own restricted conception of nature privileging either the bodily or the soul-like respectively. Nature is identified with either “world-stuff” or “mind-idea” and in both cases to the exclusion or the reduction to secondary status of the other.

If we take a very brief look at one of the most explicit discussions of *physis* in Aristotle there are clear differences to Plato but the conceptual structure is similar. A short selection from the *Physics*:

Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes.

‘By nature’ the animals and their parts exist, and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air, water)—for we say that these and the like exist ‘by nature’.

All the things mentioned present a feature in which they differ from things which are not constituted by nature. Each of them has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness (in respect of place or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration). On the other hand, a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort, qua receiving these designations—i.e. in so far as they are products of art—have no innate impulse to change. But in so far as they happen to be composed of stone or of earth or of a mixture of the two, they do have such an impulse, and just to that extent—which seems to indicate that nature is a source or cause of being moved and being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, (...)

(...)

Some identify the nature or substance of a natural object with that immediate constituent of it which taken by itself is without arrangement, e.g. the wood is the ‘nature’ of the bed, and the bronze the ‘nature’ of the statue.

(...)

Another account is that 'nature' is the shape or form which is specified in the definition of the thing. (...) (not separable except in statement).

(...)

The form indeed is 'nature' rather than the matter; for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained to fulfilment than when it exists potentially. (Aristotle *Physics*: 2, 1, (192 b 7–193 b 12))

The discussion is mainly concerned with how to understand the nature of something. Like in Plato, we find here both a definition of the word 'nature' (an inner source or cause of being moved and being at rest) and two competing conceptions of what that source is, namely matter and form (the material and the formal cause in Aristotle's sense). Aristotle himself finds it most satisfying to regard the formal (and the teleological or final) cause as the nature of *x*. The official theory of Aristotle seems, thus, to be a restricted idealist conception of nature presented with the possibility of a restricted materialist conception of nature in clear view, but for him the underlying contrast is between matter and form rather than between body and soul.

4.

With reference to Plato and Aristotle I have characterized two sorts of contrasting or restricted conceptions of nature, a materialist and an idealist. Each of them could be seen as underlying a sort of naturalism in ethics or in other branches of philosophy. The materialist conception of nature is at the root of bald, empiricist naturalism and of the many different modern forms of naturalism that let one or other interpretation of the results of present day science define what belongs to nature and what not. (A materialist conception of nature is also being taken for granted by most forms of non-naturalism, whether subjectivist or supernaturalist). The idealist conception of nature is at the root of the natural law tradition of naturalism that is still alive. The philosophical impulse behind both these sorts of naturalism is to see the ethical in continuity rather than discontinuity with nature understood as that which is most primary in existence and most objective in experience. They just happen to disagree about what that is.

With reference to the over-arching or all-inclusive use of the concept of nature I have further characterized a non-contrasting conception of nature. This could be taken as underlying a third sort of naturalism that could be called unrestricted or absolute naturalism. This is not the most common sort of naturalism, though it is not unheard of either. There might be something like it in Heraclitus or forms of Stoicism, and there certainly is something like it in Spinoza's conception of *Deus sive Natura*, the *Natura* that is the underlying unity of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* and which alone could be said to be its own cause, *causa sui*. In modern philosophy I believe that nothing less than this is implied by the concept of natural history in § 25 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

—Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (Wittgenstein 1967: 12)

It is even more explicit in the young Adorno when he says:

If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed, then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible *to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.* (Adorno 1984: 117, italics in original)¹

The emphasis on the historical character of nature and the natural character of history is important to counter our tendency to think of nature as static and the human as free-floating. Whatever happens happens in nature. I find this sort of naturalism also in Dewey when he uses an example from geology to stress a point relating to aesthetics:

Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident, in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish. (Dewey 1958: 3–4, italics in original)

On this conception the aesthetical (and the ethical) are not independent of nature, but they are not somehow based on nature or supervening on it either; rather, they simply are nature in some of its manifest operations. To think otherwise is both to mystify the aesthetical (and ethical) and to trivialize nature. The man-made, the artificial, the cultural, the historical, the ethical, the normative, the mental, the logical, the abstract, the mysterious, the extraordinary, are all examples of ways of being natural rather than examples of ways of being non-natural. Nature is never *mere* nature. That which is *more* than *mere* is nature, too.

The philosophical impulse behind this third sort of naturalism is a general anti-dualism and anti-reductivism. If there were no anti-naturalists and no reductive naturalists there would be little point in insisting on understanding nature as all-inclusive. This could therefore not be the first form of naturalism to be developed historically. We have to begin with a struggle between different conceptions of what is primary to what, but the fact that there are so many incompatible contrasting and restricted conceptions of nature and the fact that each of them creates formidable difficulties in accounting for that which is regarded as non-natural provides a strong motivation for trying to explicate an absolute conception. Calling that which is at one side of a distinction 'nature' has a metaphysical import that inevitably tends to turn that distinction into a dualism. To take the absolute conception of nature for granted does not by itself

solve any problems and it involves problems of its own, but it seems to me the most promising way of avoiding the otherwise endless oscillation between materialist and idealist, empiricist and rationalist conceptions of nature while at the same time keeping in touch with the genuine tensions from which they spring: Something surely at the very centre of McDowell's thinking.

According to this sort of naturalism one should resist any tendency to regard nature as a special realm or domain among other realms or domains. Nature is that which all possible domains are domains of. Nature is all there is, all that is the fact, all that happens. There is nothing above or beyond nature and there is nothing below or besides nature either. On this conception of nature to say that something is natural is not to say something specific about it but merely to deny claims from others that a certain domain could be in discontinuity with or be *sui generis* in relation to nature, given that it has its own nature and belongs to nature in this the broadest possible sense.

On this conception of nature, nothing could be non-natural, unnatural, supernatural or extra-natural. So, of course, the ethical is natural. There is nothing else it could be. Nothing is secondary in an absolute sense. The totality of absolutely everything, however, is primary in an absolute sense which gives room for all kinds of relations of priority between different aspects within the totality.² Using the famous quotation from Sellars we could say that to understand nature is to understand 'how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term' (Sellars 1963 : 1).

Both materialist and idealist naturalism may be argued for with reference to science. (Emphasizing the mathematical and law-like character of science may be taken to point in an idealist direction.) Unrestricted naturalism can equally claim to be capturing what is important about science. Here, however, it is not particular results or aspects of science that are taken to define what is nature and what is not. It is rather the open, undogmatic character of science combined with its aspiration to account for everything in continuity with everything else that one appeals to. Using another famous quotation from Sellars against himself we could say that where restricted, empiricist naturalism is claiming that 'science is the measure of all things', (Sellars 1963: 173) unrestricted naturalism takes it to be defining of science that all things are the measure of science.

These are my three sorts of naturalism. How do they correspond to McDowell's two sorts of naturalism? As I have already indicated, I find that what McDowell calls bald or empiricistic naturalism is clearly in the tradition of a restricted materialist naturalism, so at least initially one should think that his own second sort of naturalism could not belong to this sort.

How about the idealist naturalism that I believe must be regarded as the official doctrines of Plato and Aristotle in the passages considered? In spite of his references to 'Greek naturalism' it seems quite clear that this could not be McDowell's second sort of naturalism, either. He is explicitly *not* trying to replace a materialist, empiricist conception of nature with an idealist, rationalist conception. He is trying to help us get free of such dualisms. It would thus be wrong to place his second sort of naturalism at the same level as bald naturalism,

in the way in which the two conceptions I have extrapolated from the discussions by Plato and Aristotle are on the same level. Idealist naturalism and absolute naturalism are two quite different ways of opposing materialist naturalism while remaining a naturalist.

If this is true McDowell's appeal to 'naturalized Platonism' and 'Aristotelian naturalism' must be somewhat problematic for his own purposes. Talking about 'naturalized Platonism' is, of course, a way of pointing beyond bald naturalism while at the same time distancing oneself from rampant Platonism, but it seems to me rather unclear what 'naturalization' could mean here. If this notion is relying on a restricted conception of nature referring to the results of science, one would need to hear more about exactly how far bald naturalism is being opened up, or exactly how far the 'partial re-enchantment of nature' is supposed to go, and these are questions McDowell, in my view wisely, refrains from trying to answer. When McDowell talks about 'Aristotelian naturalism' or 'naturalism of second nature' it is clearly Aristotle's position in the *Ethics* that he has in mind, but the use of the concept of *physis* there is quite consistent with its use in the *Physics*. When Aristotle says of the moral virtues that they:

...are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit. (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1103a26)

the point is precisely to emphasize that virtues, like beds, are not due to nature and not according to nature though, again like beds, not contrary to nature either. In modern usage, I suppose, the notion of second nature is mainly used about some, but not other, habitual traits that are so firm that they are like nature (considered as permanent) without actually being nature (permanent). Any distinction between first and second nature certainly keeps something like the bald naturalist conception of nature in the picture, and leaves it an open question exactly how far into the ethical (or mental) second nature reaches.

The way I have presented an absolute naturalism based on an unrestricted conception of nature seems to me to be an acceptable, radical, and satisfying sort of ethical naturalism both in itself and for many of McDowell's purposes. This conception is not simply a 'liberal' or a 'relaxed' naturalism, it actually needs a rather careful explanation because it is clearly not as if we would all know what nature is if only we got rid of the misleading bald conception of it. Nevertheless, there is something straightforward about it. McDowell has convincingly shown that what Bernard Williams calls the absolute conception of reality is merely restricted, bald naturalism ideologically presented as absolute (*MVR*: 112–31, esp. sect. 5). Nothing less than a naturalism that deserves to be presented as absolute could help break the spell of bald naturalism without merely replacing one restricted sort of naturalism with another and thus keeping the oscillations going. A naturalism based on the unrestricted, absolute conception of nature seems to me to be the only candidate. There may be restricted conceptions of nature that I have not taken into account, but if McDowell's own, second sort of naturalism

should be understood as based on such a conception, perhaps some kind of materialist or empiricist naturalism somehow less restricted than bald naturalism, it seems fair to say that he owes us an account of exactly where and why he draws his line between nature and something else, and in particular what that something else is supposed to be.

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NOTES

¹ 'Wenn die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Natur und Geschichte ernsthaft gestellt werden soll, bietet sie nur dann Aussicht auf Beantwortung, wenn es gelingt, *das Geschichtliche Sein in seiner äußersten geschichtlichen Bestimmtheit, da wo es am geschichtlichsten ist, selber als ein naturhaftes Sein zu begreifen, oder wenn es gelänge, die Natur da, wo sie als Natur scheinbar am tiefsten in sich verharret, zu begreifen als ein geschichtliches Sein*' (Adorno 1973: 354–55).

² If anyone should doubt that there is a consistent notion of absolutely everything for nature to be identified with, I can recommend a highly technical paper by Timothy Williamson called 'Everything', where scepticism about absolute generality is shown to be inconsistent though everything is not identified with nature (Williamson 2003).

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Abbreviations:

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