

Martin Lenz • Anik Waldow  
Editors

# Contemporary Perspectives on Early Modern Philosophy

Nature and Norms in Thought

 Springer

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# Chapter 1

## Nature and Norms in Thought

Martin Lenz and Anik Waldow

The present volume joins contributions to early modern debates on nature and norms in thought with decidedly contemporary perspectives, thereby hoping to shed new light on developments in early modern philosophy as well as enrich current discussions on the relation between nature and norms. Clearly, the relation between mind and world poses perennial problems and debates. How do we explain that thoughts and other mental states have content? What makes it the case that some thought is about this rather than that thing? Do our perceptions and thoughts match the world? How do we categorize things? Do our concepts carve up nature at its joints? Is thinking a kind of action? Where does it take place? Is it embodied? What makes thoughts and sentences true or false? Do beliefs aim at truth? Do true beliefs constitute knowledge? What makes our thoughts adequate? Can our beliefs fail to reach epistemic goals? Does thought depend on interaction with other thinkers? Can other animals think too? Do we need language to think? Can we ever be sure about anything?

In the twentieth century, these and related debates about the relation between mind and world have taken on a new form as a result of the emerging influence of naturalist and normativist theories.<sup>1</sup> We can better understand what is involved in this, and especially the claim that nature and norms are to be conceived in opposition to one another, by looking at the question of how mental states acquire content. *Naturalists* such as Jerry Fodor typically answer this question by invoking *causal*

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, De Caro and Macarthur (2010) and Putnam (2002).

M. Lenz (✉)

Department of the History of Philosophy, University of Groningen,  
Oude Boteringestraat 52, 9712GL Groningen, The Netherlands  
e-mail: m.lenz@rug.nl

A. Waldow

Department of Philosophy, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia  
e-mail: anik.waldow@sydney.edu.au

theories of mental content.<sup>2</sup> The basic idea here is that thoughts are about their causes: I can think about water because there is water in the world that causes me to have the concept of water. By contrast, *normativists* such as Robert Brandom see themselves as standing in the tradition of Wittgenstein's private language argument and argue that references to causal mechanisms are not sufficient as an explanation for content determination.<sup>3</sup> The basic idea is that the contents of concepts are fixed by the *use* of these concepts, rather than causal processes. On this view, it is because our concepts play an essential role in inferential relations (to which thinkers subscribe) and because different thinkers interact and sanction one another in their use of language that it is possible that concepts acquire content. Conceived in this way, thinking about water presupposes a commitment to inferences that combine claims about attributes such as being liquid and wet.

Once we turn to the problem of error, the divide between naturalists and normativists becomes even more obvious. What does it mean to say that a concept has been misapplied or that a belief is false? Imagine that you express a false belief by calling the water in front of you "gin". What are the resources to explain this error? Is this error merely the result of a mismatch between your concept and the relevant facts, or rather a consequence of having broken a conventionally established rule?

Naturalists tend to think that this error is the result of a deviation from facts. But even if it is such a deviation that causes error, one may object that it is hard to explain how it is possible to identify which one among all other causal relations gives rise to the right kind of concept (namely, water). Normativists circumnavigate this problem by arguing that talk about misapplication, misrepresentation, correctness and incorrectness already betrays the omnipresence of socially established norms.

Generally speaking, while naturalists appeal to causal relations between mind and world in order to explain how it is possible to think and speak meaningfully about the world, normativists refer to inferential relations and social interactions between agents.

Of course, to think of naturalism and normativism as standing in opposition to one another is not specific to debates in the philosophy of mind, but also manifests itself in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, especially when the question arises as to whether it is possible to naturalize these disciplines. However, despite this overarching trend in philosophy, there are also approaches that try to bridge what others conceive as a gap, namely, by naturalizing normativity itself. Ruth Millikan, for instance, has chosen this path. She neither explains misrepresentation in terms of causal processes nor by invoking a breach of social conventions, but instead conceptualizes error in relation to the evolutionary function of cognitive mechanisms. Put crudely, her account suggests that if the water in front of me produces gin-thoughts, the error does not lie in the breaking of a rule but in the relevant cognitive mechanism's failure to comply with its biological purpose.<sup>4</sup> John McDowell's theory of concepts, Philippa

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<sup>2</sup> See esp. Fodor (1987).

<sup>3</sup> See Brandom (1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Millikan (2004).

Foot's ethics or Peter Stemmer's ontology of normativity can, in some sense, each be read in a similar vein, namely as attempts to undermine the opposition between nature and normativity.<sup>5</sup> We can here see that one crucial question that still needs to be answered is whether it is justified to think of the natural and normative as two mutually exclusive categories, and as such as two separate conceptual realms, or whether we have reasons to think that norms and nature can jointly figure in our explanations.

But what, then, are the natural and the normative aspects of thought? Although contemporary debates often focus on methodological and metaphilosophical issues in relation to the function of explanation (its placement and fruitfulness), much of what is going on here is a consequence of the conceptual divide between the natural and the normative – a divide that has often been seen as having its roots in early modern philosophy. Thus, the conceptual question of the compatibility of the natural and the normative clearly has a historical dimension.<sup>6</sup> In Descartes, for instance, the separation of nature from the realm of the normative takes the form of an exclusion of teleological explanations from the world of mechanical causes, and also informs the ubiquitous and difficult attempts to distinguish between sensation as a mechanical process, on the one hand, and judgment as a norm-guided act of the intellect, on the other. Another infamous way of separating the natural from the normative is typically associated with the Humean distinction between *Is* and *Ought*, a distinction that has often been discussed in connection with the Moorean charge of the naturalistic fallacy.

But although these examples are present in the history of philosophy, we nevertheless must ask whether it is justified to conceive of these early modern approaches as “forerunners” of modern theories with a strong focus on the opposition between the natural (taken as the realm of law) and the normative (taken as something non-natural that mainly rests on social conventions). Richard Rorty's historiography suggests that early modern philosophy may be conceived as having introduced the rigid distinction between the realms of the natural and normative, but that it did so in a very confused and erroneous way in its failure to see that mental representations were not simply “mirroring” nature.<sup>7</sup>

Rorty's historiography is still fairly influential,<sup>8</sup> even though it might appear to some like an “outdated caricature” of early modern philosophy of mind and epistemology.<sup>9</sup> Given its influence, however, should we not worry that this book too will appear anachronistic? It might look as if the entire debate in contemporary philosophy about the standing of nature and the normative has been inspired by the pragmatist tradition and as such constitutes a very recent development in philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> See McDowell (1986), Foot (2003), and Stemmer (2008).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Brandom (2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Rorty (1979, 131–164).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Tartaglia (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Hatfield (2005, 98).

To be sure, the danger of providing an anachronistic account emerges for anyone working in the history of philosophy. A way to handle this problem then perhaps consists in accepting that we do indeed have philosophical interests of our own and that we want to bring them to bear on our discussion of the past, and vice versa. This book, then, is an attempt to do precisely this: it will provide studies of historical accounts by joining them with decidedly contemporary perspectives.

But what then can be said about the historical dimension of the question regarding the compatibility of the natural and the normative? Generally speaking, the first thing to note is that early modern works often *conjoin* what has only later been divided, namely the treatment of epistemological, metaphysical and moral questions.

A second point concerns the notion of nature. As has already been indicated above, Descartes' and Spinoza's exclusions of teleological explanation from the realm of nature has often been seen as indicating a strict division of the natural world of mechanism, on the one hand, and the world of human intentions, conventions and norms, on the other. To put this claim into perspective, it is important to note, however, that early modern conceptions of nature and natural laws are notoriously ambiguous. While "law of nature" (*lex naturae*) is mostly understood as referring to divine or moral law, which in its fixity contrasts with variable conventions, nature (*natura*) was also taken to be that out of which second nature (*altera natura*) emerges when acquired habits establish themselves. This suggests that it would be wrong to believe that the meaning of the concept of nature is exhaustively captured by its opposition to the concept of convention.<sup>10</sup>

A third point that ought to be considered in this context is the charge of individualism so often associated with early modern philosophy. While it is certainly true that early modern philosophers had a great interest in human beings and their history, this interest did not lead them to focus on the individual mind or agent in isolations from the social sphere. This in principle already follows from the early modern approach to philosophy in which epistemology and ethics are explicitly conjoined. Here then it would appear that much of the work ostensibly focused on the individual in fact regards intersubjective practices as a means of establishing knowledge and morals.

We can here already see – and this will become even clearer once we enter into the various discussions in this book – that early modern philosophy offers an abundance of rather elaborate views on the relation between nature and normativity, that is, views that are very different from those depicted in Rorty's caricature. A good example is Locke's discussion of essences. On the face of it, there seems to be nothing particularly normative about essences: they are merely that which causes a thing to have these rather than those properties. However, in fact it turns out that each time we take a thing to belong to a certain kind, our cognitive make-up and practical needs influence how we do this. This means that if we were beings with different capacities and needs we would carve up the world quite differently. Thus, although

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<sup>10</sup>On the early modern debates on the *lex naturae* see Haakonssen (1998).

there are real essences, our actual attributions of kind membership are governed by our interests and needs. Now, since such ascriptions are not only driven by certain conventions, but are also unfailingly prescriptive in that they specify what a thing ought to be like in order to belong to a certain kind, it becomes evident that in Locke kind membership cannot be understood independently of the normative constraints that render this membership possible.<sup>11</sup>

More generally, we can also perceive that in early modern philosophy the attempt to substantiate a theory about the normative dimension of ostensibly natural processes is often interlinked with the endeavor of redefining the scope and limits as well as the methodology of the sciences. For instance, Locke's discussion of essences not only reveals the normative implications of our kind terms, but also intends to restructure the foundations of the various sciences and their respective methodologies. And although it here seems that there are in fact connections between rather different philosophical intentions, it would be premature to conclude from this alone that reflections on the relation between norms and nature must determine a philosopher's choice of methodology. Spinoza, for example, is clear that the normative notions of goodness and badness do not pick out kinetic or mechanistic properties of the universe, and yet he still thinks that these notions are methodologically indispensable.<sup>12</sup>

In order to do justice to the complex structures undergirding the conceptions of what mind is and how it relates to the world in its thoughts and scientific explanations, this book is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the way in which nature and norms can be conceived as influencing the formation of thought. The chapters of the second part will investigate how a certain conception of what the mind is, and ought to do when engaging with the deliverances of the senses, reason and the imagination, becomes the defining feature in the shaping of the norms of philosophical inquiry. Each part will contain one discussion that examines the relevant topics in a contemporary context, thus opening up a space in which continuities (and discontinuities) between early modern perspectives and those of today can be perceived.

## 1.1 Part I Nature's Influence on the Mind

The chapters in this part are case studies of themes prominently discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind, epistemology and ontology. They focus on questions of intentionality, the nature of beliefs, the standard of ontological classification, the relation between perceptual and conceptual representation, and the concept of knowledge. By examining how early modern philosophers conceived of nature as underwriting the formation of normative standards and the way in which norms

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<sup>11</sup> See Lenz (2010, 446–454) and Pasnau (2011, 633–661).

<sup>12</sup> See Spinoza (1994, *Ethica* IV praefatio).

embedded in a social context can provide a framework for nature to assert itself, it will become clear that there is reason for us to rethink and refresh our current philosophical theories.

At least since Brentano, questions of intentionality have revolved around one particular problem, which is often even named “*the* problem of intentionality”: that is, the problem of what it is for a mental state to be a representation *of* something else, let us say a thing in the world. As has already been noted, the possibility that something can be misrepresented forces naturalists to account for the normative dimension of perceptual processes. Yet, as Lionel Shapiro argues, early modern debates can be used to broaden and refine our understanding of what intentionality is. According to Shapiro, Descartes and Locke, for instance, distinguish between two kinds of ofness: the first being the ordinary kind of “propositional ofness” that accounts for our capacity to form the thought “that *p*”. The second kind of intentionality is a “representational ofness” the recognition of which was forced upon Descartes and Locke by the need to account for the success of our proper methods of inquiry. According to Shapiro, this distinction between two kinds of intentionality maps onto two kinds of normativity exemplified by the well-known truth norm of propositional intentionality, on the one hand, and the norms governing the ideal improvement of representational intentionality, on the other.

The idea that truth might not be the only norm that governs the intentionality of beliefs is also taken up by Martin Lenz’s discussion of Spinoza. Against Robert Brandom Lenz argues that Spinoza offers a fairly thorough account of the normativity of ideas. In construing ideas as propositional attitudes, he suggests that Spinoza’s ideas are beliefs that respond to two kind of normative constraints. On the one hand, beliefs count as naturally normative in that they are grounded in our striving for self-preservation (*conatus*). On the other hand, they exhibit a kind of socially rooted normativity in that they are governed by associations reinforced by custom and convention.

Besides accounting for intentional and epistemological aspects of thought, early modern theories of ideas also serve to explain ontological classification. As is well-known, Locke’s ontological distinctions between qualities, substances, modes and relations are driven by his taxonomy of ideas. Whether something can be called a substance is decided by the fact that it can be conceived as existing independently of something else. But what precisely does it mean to conceive of something in this way? To address this question, Antonia LoLordo invokes three problems in Locke’s analysis of the relation between substance and mode. She argues that there are crucial tensions in the way Locke construes the realm of so-called natural kinds by contrasting it with the realms of mathematics and morality.

In the Kantian context, the problem of how it is possible to bridge the gap between mind and world has often been articulated by drawing attention to the various processes involved in cognition. Sensation has here been seen as a natural affair in that it requires of the cognitive subject no more than passive receptivity, while the formation of concepts has been regarded as norm-guided in that it responds to the demands of spontaneous reason. With the introduction of such conceptual divides, it becomes difficult to see, however, how it possible to form empirical concepts at

all. Johannes Haag's paper addresses this problem by examining how on Kant's account natural and normative capacities can be conceived as interacting with one another. Haag takes off from a broadly Sellarsian framework, but goes beyond it by arguing that the possibility of such interaction depends on the imagination and its role in the mediation between sensation and conception.

As has been noted above, a common strategy in contemporary debates on the relation of nature and normativity consists in naturalizing the notions of intentionality and knowledge. One of the seemingly most radical proposals comes from Hilary Kornblith who argues (against Edward Craig and others) that knowledge is a natural kind rather than the phenomenon we commonly think to pick out in our discussions on justification and epistemic norms. By refining the historical notion of knowledge defended by Craig, Martin Kusch shows that Kornblith stands much closer to Craig than his criticism of Craig suggests, thus underlining that in this particular case naturalists and normativists can in fact be perceived as allies rather than opponents.

## **1.2 Part II Shaping the Norms of Our Intellectual and Practical Engagement with the World**

The second part of this book will examine the ways in which in the early modern era reflections on the mind's various sentimental and rational capacities were utilized to transform the concept of the human being, and in relation to this the norms of intellectual and moral practices. Reflections of this kind usually emerged in response to questions about the place of the thinking subject in nature and society, our ability to take control of the way we experience and conceptualize the world, and the normative demands that ought to guide these processes.

As we will see in many of the chapters of this second part of the book, at the heart of this development lies a change in the perception of what reason is and how it is able to manifest itself in our thoughts and actions – a change that was often motivated by a reevaluation of the role that our sensibility plays in the formation of higher rational and moral capacities. Different thinkers had different ideas about the way in which the relation between affective and rational capacities should be understood. However, a common feature of approaches inspired by Locke's sensationalist epistemology was that mental activity – even in its most abstract and life-detached variation – was no longer regarded in isolation from spontaneous sensory and sentimental reactions, but instead was conceived as the result of the mind's ability to engage with affective processes caused by one's embodied existence.

In a certain sense, this recognition of the body as a necessary prerequisite for the development of higher rational capacities led to a conception of nature as the all encompassing category that needed to be reckoned with when trying to explain what is characteristic of human intellectual, moral and social life. The interesting development in this was that nature was often represented as the realm out of which specifically human attributes, such as reason and language, emerged to the effect that, on the one hand, human beings could be regarded as integral parts of nature

while, on the other, they could also be conceptualized as active agents able to comply with the normative demands of reason and morality.

Curiously, in this debate more was at stake than the mere reevaluation of reason and its relation to affective components. The claim that the mind must develop the right kind of skills and attitudes in order to be able to engage with the world in a fruitful way was usually expressed to articulate dissatisfaction with the current philosophical practices. Questions about the way in which agents, inquirers and minds ought to proceed when exploring the world and their own responsibilities thus translated into concerns about the aims and goals of the philosophical discipline, and called for a justification of current intellectual practices.

Stephen Gaukroger explores these interconnections between early modern theories of the mind and attempts to reform the philosophical agenda more generally in his discussion of the problem of how to reconcile, or choose between, the competing demands of reason and sensibility. By tracing the root of this problem back to two broader developments among the French Lockceans, on the one hand, and Hume, on the other, Gaukroger reveals how something that at first looks narrowly epistemological turns out to have a central moral and social dimension. In his analysis of Baumgarten's and Herder's strategies to counter a dilemma to which Hume's radicalization of the dichotomy between sensibility and reason had led, it furthermore becomes clear that a heightened interest in the role of sensibility called for a transformation of the style of philosophy in general.

Anik Waldow's paper ventures further into the debate about the aims and goals of eighteenth century philosophy by discussing Herder's concept of *Bildung*. Herder, she argues, effectively undermines the dichotomy between reason and sensibility by urging that individuals ought to be educated in the art of using their various affective and rational capacities in an integrated way. The use of pre-rational capacities here becomes a *sine qua non* for a successful intellectual practice. Against this background, it emerges that the push against speculative metaphysics and towards an experience-focused philosophy did not result in something that could be termed a form of reductive verificationism. Instead, it prepared the way for a diversification of those cognitive elements allowed to play a role in the formation of knowledge.

With the move away from learning, logic and metaphysics and towards a philosophical culture that recognized the value of sentiments and affective body-induced states for the cultivation of the mind, a new interest in the role of education was sparked. In Annette Pierdziwol's analysis of Rousseau's *Emile*, this education takes the form of an artful stimulation of bodily sensibilities. By contrasting this sentimental education with the educational effects of an untutored exposure to society, she demonstrates how considerations about the way the body works and affects the mind can motivate considerations about the norms of a commendable educational program. Nature here emerges as circumscribing the norms of moral education in a twofold way: on the one hand, it offers the resources with which we have to work; on the other hand, it delimits the range of skills and attributes that are to be cultivated, because only that which is deemed natural is seen as beneficial to an agent's moral development, even though, as Pierdziwol argues, what is natural for Rousseau can only be discovered in hindsight, that is, after an individual's education has been completed.

To acknowledge the body as an instrument in the cultivation of morality is of course not to deny that it is due to this body that we perceive ourselves as integral parts of the great chain of cause and effect that determines processes in nature. But although we might think of ourselves as partly determined by events in the natural world, the question emerges as to how the fact that we have understanding and are susceptible to the demands of reason and morality serves to open up a unique way of dealing with the constraints nature imposes on us.

Eric Schliesser explores this question in relation to Smith's concept of the *piacular*, that is, a form of shame felt when we become the cause of unintended harm. Schliesser argues that, according to Smith, humanity requires us to accept that we participate in the causal chain of life and therefore become liable to harms we did not intend to cause, while also acknowledging that Smith stresses the importance of highly regulated norms of atonement. Superstition is here analyzed as an element that taints the norms through which the *piacular* feeling can be discharged. Schliesser's analysis thus reiterates a point that has surfaced in many of the previous discussions, namely that for many early modern thinkers an understanding of the norms that govern our epistemic and moral practices requires that we become aware of, and acknowledge as a matter of fact, the non-rational elements that crucially determine the way in which we experience the world.

These analyses bring into focus the way in which early modern philosophers conceived of nature and norms as influencing one another in the human attempt to rationalize their epistemic and moral engagement with the world. Such a focus not only puts us in a better position to reevaluate the contemporary practice of drawing a firm line between nature and normativity, it can also help us see that today's constellation of problems might make it necessary for us to rethink the relation between the realms of nature and the human in yet another way. Michael Hampe takes up this line of thought when arguing that the ecological crisis requires us to overcome anthropocentric approaches to nature, which have their roots in the seventeenth century's humble acceptance that the human perspective is the only one available to us. By claiming that contemporary adaptations of early modern panpsychism can help us to correct this anthropocentric paradigm, he stresses that even today there is a need for us to think of philosophy as an intellectual exercise with genuinely pragmatic consequences. He thus returns us in conclusion to a thought that has prominently figured in the early modern attempt to conceive of philosophy as a form of education.

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