

HUMAN NATURE

20th Century Philosophy in a new Key

Author: Allan M Savage, D. Litt.

Created: 17 April, 2022
[approx. 5000 words]

“Very few of the observations and concepts I have used in this investigation are original, most are not even new. What I have tried to accomplish here – the sort of task that philosophy had always deemed among its chief responsibilities, though in the anglophone world as I gather no longer – is mainly to arrange a large number of tesserae that, if taken one by one, are very familiar, into the single mosaic of a fairly comprehensive and *unconventional philosophical synthesis*.”¹

This essay is a précis (for which I take full responsibility) of Chapters One and Two of Leslie Dewart’s seminal book consisting of Nine Chapters. The perspective he presented here, to my mind, sets a fresh intellectual trajectory for philosophical contemplation. Written towards the end of the 20th century the book is not an easy read, but since it introduces an alternative and refreshing philosophical interpretation, I offer this précis in the hope that it may inspire readers to read the entire book in the context of the 21st Century experience. His “single mosaic” is not the unified intellectual fruit of classical Western philosophy, but rather is an insightful statement of the alternatives (described in the epilogue of the book) consciously available to the human species of the future. And unless otherwise noted, all italics are in Dewart’s original text.

Dewart immediately states that “the purpose of this inquiry is to develop a philosophic theory of the origin and the subsequent prehistoric development of the specifically human characteristics of human beings.” We could facilitate improving human conditions today if we could understand sufficiently well how human nature came into being. Undertaking a philosophical review illustrates that “the explanations of human evolution devised so far by science are neither as satisfactory nor as useful as they might be, and that philosophy might help remedy those defects.” However, in undertaking this task he also acknowledges that philosophy in exercising “its jurisdiction on the subject [has] likewise been wanting.”

Further, earlier philosophic explanations of human evolution often depended on some sort of “force” from within or “direction” from without. These theories are incompatible with the concept of Charles Darwin’s *natural selection* and have been justifiably dismissed by scientists, he observes. The process of natural selection allows an organism to survive until it reaches reproductive age. As survival characteristics accumulate “the species changes; a new

¹ Dewart, Leslie (1989: xi) *EVOLUTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS: The Role of Speech in the Origin and Development of Human Nature* University of Toronto Press [my italics].

form of life appears, embodying a particular way in which organisms can be adaptively related to their world.” In this process unfavourable characteristics are self-eliminating.

“If this, however, is how evolution comes about – if this interrelation [of survival characteristics] is the *cause* of the transformation of species – then the supposition of evolutionary forces is superfluous.” And since this is true of both natural and supernatural forces, the result is an innovative conception of causal explanation without the presumption of the notion of a necessitating force. Thus, the application of a simple extension of the theory of evolution to human beings without allowing for the peculiarities of human nature is questioned. “The conception of natural selection may be applied to human evolution only if it is first transposed into a human key.” This transposition is necessary because human life is more than the genetically conditioned physiology of the human organism which many non-critical thinkers mistakenly assume to be the cause of human life. A re-evaluation of the inherited idea of the nature of causality is required to overcome the inadequacies of this notion. To be re-evaluated is the idea that “according to the Greeks, a cause was a source of ‘necessity’ (anankē), that is, the exertion of a compelling force that brought about change, and without which no change could take place.”

Before the advent of Scholasticism, Christian philosophers had developed a system of natural forces recognized as a hierarchy composed of causes and effects rooted in the “all-necessitating power of a transcendent First Cause.” With the advent of Scholasticism, “in the theology of Aquinas, God creates by exercising his efficient causality so as to bring into being out of nothing, and to continue to maintain in being, an entity’s act of existing; the entity’s characteristics, including the way in which it operates and causes effects, are in turn the effect of its act of existing.” However, creaturely causes, according to Scholastic reasoning, can only bring about a re-configuration of what already exists since only God can be a creative cause. Dewart notes that “in time it would become clear that a world so conceived was not simply a deterministic system, but a *closed* one.” Even though modern science eventually emancipated itself from theology, common sense reasoning in Western philosophy maintained “that effects can be ‘nothing but’ what their causes have compelled them to be.” Eventually, modern scientific predictability was introduced into human affairs which questioned this presumption. That is, to understand the effects of natural causes is to understand what these phenomena really are, and what reality really is.²

Dewart then asks: “Why then, did the reductionistic concept of causality survive in science?” He answers his own question: “In considerable part for the same reason it was also preserved, albeit confusedly, in our secular culture’s common sense: because, although ideas have no measurable mass, they exhibit cultural inertia and acquire historical momentum.” In other words, the “force” of cultural inertia and of historical momentum can impede an evolutionary understanding of the advancement of human knowledge. Further, Dewart notes that it was a

² This question arose within Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) philosophy. Cf. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics that will be able to Present Itself as a Science* (Peter Lucas, ed.) Manchester University Press (1959).

failure of the early scientists “that they did not always realize the religious origin of some of the concepts they took for granted as part of the conventional wisdom of their age.”

But is it true that things and events are nothing but the effects of their causes? Does human experience support this conclusion? Dewart thinks not. “The procedure that a strict and consistent empiricism prescribes is thus the opposite of what many scientists continue to assume. One should not expect to discover what a thing really is by ascertaining its causes; on the contrary, one should first ascertain what it really is, so that one can then reliably recognize the causes that explain it.” Thus, causes are made subordinate to the “explicandum” which “is the heart of the procedure that the jargon calls *phenomenology*.” Dewart gives two examples of phenomena that have not been sufficiently philosophically criticized and are readily accepted in common sense understanding. They are, in fact, examples of the failure on the part of biologists to determine the specificity of human life. “I refer in particular to the ideas of consciousness and human selfhood echoed upon occasion by science, such as the conception of thought that has enabled some scientists to believe that computers can think, and the conception of selfhood that has enabled others to conclude that chimpanzees have a self-concept comparable to that of human beings.” To correct this misunderstanding, Dewart maintains that contemporary philosophy’s primary task must be to develop a theory of evolution that determines the nature of an organism of the human kind. This particular theory of evolution will compensate for the scientific method which makes no provision for reflecting upon what human beings experience themselves to be.

Contemporary philosophers rightfully inquire into the nature of human specificity. And among Dewart’s conclusions is “that the essence of human life lies in its conscious quality; for being conscious is what we immediately experience ourselves to be.” Humans experience their own “otherness” to the world and its reality which allows for them to learn something of their own selfhood and act as agents of their own behaviour. In short: “The ability to experience reality as such and oneself as real is the essence of human conscious life.” But this does not mean that consciousness is the equivalent of the human biological process, but only its effect. Consciousness as an effect is not reducible to a physical cause. Further, human evolutionary adaptation differs from non-human evolutionary adaptations. Dewart writes: “Human adjustment differs from the animal kind in that man’s relations to his environment are mediated by a special kind of experience: the sort, as we have seen, that endows him with a sense of selfhood and a sense of reality.” This special kind of experience, or evolutionary adaptation, ultimately results in human society and culture.

Dewart’s examination of human consciousness addresses a series of propositions. One, to be human is to have conscious life and selfhood. Two, the entirety of human life is a consequence of consciousness. Three, consciousness characterizes the functioning of the human organism, which cannot be reduced to its functioning processes. Four, the capacity for becoming a self is acquired, rather than innate. Fifth, the ability to speak precedes the acquisition of consciousness and selfhood. As he informs his readers: “This investigation will thus be guided by the hypothesis that, through speaking, the individual human organism converts its inborn ability to experience into the acquired ability to experience consciously – though once the latter

has been developed it is no longer necessary actually to speak in order to experience consciously.” All this is to maintain that consciousness comes into being as a direct effect of speech. He guides his hypothesis through three focal points; how speech originated out of infrahuman communication, how its emergence characterizes conscious human life “and how consciousness would have thereafter continued to evolve in accordance with the properties of speech, until human nature became what it is today.” That is to say that speech is communication of the assertive kind, determined by cultural causes of a specific sort, and particular to human beings. Communication is inborn, whereas the ability to speak is acquired socio-culturally.

Human consciousness has disclosed that an evolutionary mechanism has become apparent to the observer/philosopher. The human observer notes “that through the operation of nothing but natural selection, a specifically human evolutionary mechanism that was not reducible to the natural selection of genes may have emerged. ... [Further,] what emerged was more than a new and higher form of communication: it was also a new form of *reproduction*.” Thus, conscious life reproduces itself in successive generations through the transmission of the uniquely human ability to speak. That is to say that speech changed the rules of natural selection when it came to the type of evolutionary adjustment to a human organism’s environment. “The interaction between adjustive characteristics and reproduction was no longer screened by the criterion of mere organic survival; evolution now selected for characteristics that contributed to the value that the conscious life of human beings had for them; evolution protected ... the satisfaction of the individual and collective needs of human organisms insofar as they were selves.”

Dewart notes that art, law, politics, economics, science, religion, philosophy, etc., “have traditionally institutionalized the means to satisfy the requirements of the specifically human form of adjustment.” And the human means of adjustment can only be undertaken by some sort of self-interpretation and world-interpretation that renders the reality of the world and humans themselves meaningful. But rendering the reality of self and the world meaningful has both a positive and negative result. “For when evolution brought forth consciousness, it eventually produced not only the sort of organism that individually and in groups could achieve a life-promoting adjustment to self and world, but also the kind that could become dangerous to itself. ... A theory of human evolution would be incomplete unless it explained the origin of some of the unhealthy, neurotic forms that human life has observably taken in the past, and continues to take, down to our own day.” Thus, I would add an engagement in war to the means whereby humans adjust to their environment.

The theory of evolution through natural selection is not a cause of the variety of the forms of life on the earth today. Rather, it is “an attempt to explain the *outcome* of the evolutionary process.” As Dewart elaborates: “Thus, from an analysis of human nature as we can observe it in ourselves, we should find it possible to determine the conditions that alone can explain how, given its infrahuman point of departure, it could have become what it now is.” Among my colleagues this comment has led some to conclude that, in the final analysis, Dewart was an atheist. I cannot agree in light of my understanding of his philosophical career. My

perspective is that he did not see the need for God in his non-conventional philosophy. In the concluding words of Chapter One he writes: “In capsule form, then, the answer that will be proposed here in reply to the question of human evolution is: human nature originated through the interaction between the functions of experiencing and speaking, which created consciousness, and thereafter it continued to evolve – as it has to the present – as a result of the interaction between the properties of conscious experience and the properties of speech.”

In Chapter Two Dewart discusses eight topics concerning the nature of human consciousness. 1) The ontological and the phenomenological approaches to the study of human nature. 2) The human specificity. 3) The self-presence of consciousness. 4) The experiential base of consciousness. 5) The consequences of consciousness for the human mode of life. 6) The relationship between consciousness and the human organism. 7) The assertiveness of consciousness and 8) The potential of consciousness for self-misinterpretation. I offer a brief description of these salient points.

1. The ontological and the phenomenological approaches to the study of human nature.

Dewart notes that the inherited biological approach to the evolution of consciousness is insufficient, “but also that phenomenology – a procedure that philosophy has long used but which has been especially developed in the twentieth century – is essential to understanding human evolution.” The advantage of phenomenology, he suggests, is its willingness to take into account the presence of the observer to that which is observed. In the older pre-phenomenological philosophical tradition, ontology and objectivity describe the same methodological approach. Both approaches seek the nature of things in themselves. These methods pretend that the nature of things can be observed *as if* it were not being observed by an interpretive agent.³ However, it is true that the presence of the observer to the observed is not that significant when the subject of philosophical consideration is not human nature. Reflection on human nature (i.e., on the “self”), however, changes the experience of the philosophical understanding of the self, allowing for self-consciousness. Thus, a philosophical interpretation of the self requires an alternative approach appropriate to addressing human self-consciousness. This is so because the human self-observer brings something unique to the interpretation of the experience of human nature that infrahuman experiencers do not bring to the experience of their nature.

The modern scientific presumption “of supposing that prejudice can be avoided through scrupulous observance of the canons of objectivity” is to be avoided in a philosophical (ontological) solution in the interpretation of human nature. In the phenomenological interpretation of human nature, the observer assigns meaning to the inherited culture and history in the interpretation of human nature. Thus, Dewart observes that “when an individual tries to understand man and world, it is too late for him to do what his ancestors did when they first became human: to begin at the beginning. For he has already been taught to think and inquire by a developing tradition that he did not create, but that on the contrary created him.” Dewart then reminds us that “anyone who should be disposed to study human nature as if it

³ My italics.

were alien to him, abstracting from the privileged information that he can as an insider obtain immediately about himself, would have in effect prejudicially assumed the reducibility of the human to the non-human; for he would have pre-supposed that the non-human, being what was first and best understood by him, provided the standard against which he could measure himself.” In fact, in a phenomenological approach the opposite occurs. Since humans have direct access to themselves, their self-understanding need not be mediated by their prior understanding of anything else. “In the study of human nature, thus, renouncing introspection is more than an unnecessary, self-decreed hobble: it is an impossibility.”

2. The human specificity.

“The characteristic that makes human beings human is the conscious quality of their experiential processes” which is never found in a disembodied state because the human organism is an essential part of human nature. Further, with respect to non-human animals, one must conclude that any similarity to human experience is by way of inference “since we have no immediate access to animal experience, we cannot answer of the basis of observed fact” as a methodological approach. “But the nature of human life must be understood from what it shows to itself about itself. That humans and animals differ in kind – or for that matter, that they do not – is rather a conclusion we may draw, if we can, from comparing what we know immediately about ourselves and what we can infer about animal life.”

Thus, the specifying feature of humanity is how humans actively process and interpret their experience. Events that are processed consciously do not have any independent reality from the processing subject. Conscious events are assigned a noumenal reality in the activity of processing by an agent. To think in terms of subject and predicate is a specifying human characteristic. “The observable fact, however, is that subjects are never found except in the state of undergoing the events that happen to them and of activating those events that make them happen.”

Further, Dewart holds that human consciousness, or subject/predicate activity is one of many processes that flow from human nature after it has acquired the capacity to speak. “We therefore seek for the explanation of consciousness in an antecedent human nature,” before speech as motivation for an unconventional philosophy.

3. The self-presence of consciousness.

An “invariable element of experiencing an object consciously consists in experiencing, moreover, *that* the object is being experienced.” However, humans often fail to be aware of the fact that they are aware simultaneously of experiencing an object and the act of experiencing it. That is, “in every conscious experience the act of experiencing is present to itself.” From this understanding Dewart concludes that non-conscious experience is not self-revealing, but conscious experience reveals something of the subject/agent. It is possible, however, for humans to wonder whether the object being experienced is real or not. But there can be no doubt about the act of conscious experiencing by a conscious subject either in the imagination or in sense experience.

“Consciousness *qualifies* experience.” Humans experience before they evaluate their experience through the use of different intellectual criteria and methodologies to qualify their experience. Infrahuman animals appear to lack intellectual criteria and methodologies to qualify their experience. Further, “selfhood necessarily follows from the conscious quality of human experience and how it lies in the background of all consciousness once the organism develops selfhood.”

4. The experiential base of consciousness.

Experiential processes begin with sensation, that is, the reception of information. “By *information* I mean the effect wrought on sentient organisms by the efficient causality of objects of experience.” The conscious quality of human experience depends solely on how the information is processed. Thus, an adequate interpretation of consciousness depends on an adequate explanation of the causal process whereby an organism acquires information. However, in the active process of an organism being informed, under no circumstances is information, as some “thing,” transmitted from reality to the organism, and no “thing” is received by the organism.

Sensation involves a causal process. Within an archaic perspective, however, “most of us assume that it consists in the exercise of a ‘power’ that resides in causal agents, which they bring to bear upon a patient as ‘energy’ or ‘force’ so as to compel or ‘necessitate’ the effects.” Change or effects in things is not due to any forceful agent but is due to the mutual spatio-temporal relations which constitute movement. That is, “to say that a thing has certain properties is rather to say that it can make a certain difference to other things.” In short, deterministic causality has been philosophically replaced by relativistic causality. The latter requires no force or necessitation.

The conscious human being has observed that adaptive evolution has given rise to an active self-determination in life. Which is to say that higher organisms also made use of information from the experience of others in addition to information from its own experience. Conscious organisms not only recognized what they needed from their environment, but also sought after it and selected it from their environment. In other words, conscious higher living organisms have a specific self-relating ability that lower living organisms lack. ⁴ As Dewart has noted: “For the organism now enjoyed not only the ability to participate in the events that determined its life, but also the ability to determine *how* to take part in such determination; it was responsible for the *quality* of its adaptive responses.”

5. The consequences of consciousness for the human mode of life.

There are three direct consequences of consciousness for human life according to Dewart. “First, the conscious experiencer is able to appreciate the *reality* of the real.” Second, one is able to experience one’s own reality as a self. “Third, appreciating both his reality and that of

⁴ Herein lies the philosophical mistake by some who believe that computers “think” for themselves. First, computers are not alive. Second, they lack any self-relating capacity, unless they have been programmed to function as such by a living human agency. Simply put, computers compute, they do not think.

the world, he can give himself a positive identity by interpreting himself in relation to an interpreted world; this self-given identity I shall call the *self-definition* of the self.” All other manifestations of humanity follow from these three. That is to say that the consequences of human consciousness are the foundations of human culture, i.e., the institutionalization of experience by which individuals define themselves.

The self is originally devoid of all identity. “The conscious organism awakens to its own reality by experiencing itself merely as the ‘something else’ to which real objects are relative; the self is, to begin with, nothing but other-than-the-object.” The self acquires its identity negatively, that is, by not being the other that is experienced. “Thus, conscious organisms possess their own identity only because they construct it; they are persons only because they develop personhood.” The human person does not pre-exist its development. “Thus, selfhood is not the antecedent, but the consequent, of conscious experience; the only antecedent required by selfhood is an organism that can function consciously, though not yet a person.”

The succession of an organism’s experiences, as human, does not merely remain a series of biological and behavioural events. Rather: “Under the concept of reality they are organized as *world*.” This world is open to interpretation and re-interpretation and constitutes the human situation in which the organism lives as a self. As a further consequence of consciousness, how organisms make use of tools differentiates the human animal from the infrahuman animal. “Some animals may use tools, and a few may even learn to make tools; but for us the world itself – whatever is real – is a tool.”⁵ Dewart continued to assert that the “world” is a tool and the peculiarly human environment, the non-natural, non-physical world that humans create for themselves is a consequence of their being conscious. Two of the more ancient idiosyncrasies of human consciousness are human society and human culture, both of which are artificial, and to which a contemporary third may be added, equally artificial, i.e., virtual reality. The human artificial environment is increasing in importance. “The fact that this environment is artificial, and that human beings manufacture it out of nothing more tangible than their experience of themselves and each other, makes it no less real than the natural, physical environment.” The human artificial environment offers a more serious challenge to the adjustive abilities of contemporary humans than the biological adjustive abilities shared with infrahuman life, according to Dewart.

The adjustive abilities of contemporary humans follow no predetermined pattern. In the 21st Century not a determinist causality, but a relative causality, is recognized as effecting the human condition. Thus, the various dimensions of experience that make up 21st Century, society, cultures and virtual reality must be re-imagined. That is to say humanity “must be imaginatively invented ... not only individually, but above all socio-culturally, [humans] must create their identity for themselves.” A religious human identity, (i.e., its society, culture and

⁵ Since Dewart wrote in 1989 much has changed in the understanding of the use of tools. “Virtual reality” has become a conceptual tool for conscious use by humans. Virtual reality, conceived as an all-enveloping artificial and fully immersive experience, was in its initial stages of evolution at the time Dewart wrote. Virtual reality (VR) obscures the experience of the natural (physical) world ordinarily experienced through the five senses. VR is not to be confused with augmented reality (AR) which is a hybrid notion which describes an enhancement of the user’s real-world views with digital overlays that incorporate artificial objects.

virtual reality) in the broadest sense of identification, is one whose social institutions “embody the response of human beings to their own questions concerning the meaning of human life and death.”

6. The relationship between consciousness and the human organism.

The intellectual tradition from the ancient Hellenists to our day conceives individual humans and humanity collectively as a type of unity, usually expressed in the form of some sort of dualism. However, individual human beings are not reducible to either their organic experience or their conscious experience. Consciousness depends upon an organism but is not a function of an organism which is to say that “it can attach to any modality of inner or outer experience: we hear consciously, see consciously, imagine consciously, reason consciously, and so on.” Since the basis of consciousness is not organic according to Dewart, “we should look instead to the way in which the human organism, unlike the animal, can process whatever information it may receive from objects.” In short, he concludes that “consciousness is a *quality* that may colour the experiential functioning of the human organism.” Dewart’s ‘colouring’ of the experiential function of the human organism is an acquired function, not an inborn one. Further, the introspective activity of consciousness appears to introduce a contradiction into the functioning of being. “In other words, [the consciousness person] appears to itself simultaneously as *having* an organism and as *being had* by it, and it is difficult to imagine how that which possesses the organism can itself be the possession of the organism.”

Consciousness is not an independently existing conceptual object. It is a dynamic function with qualitative characteristics that require an appropriate organism in order to appear. Thus, consciousness, or the conscious person, is its own agent. “Consciousness has *phenomenal autonomy*; it is the quality of an organic function that needs no other function than itself, and no substratum other than the organism, in order to be present to itself. But this is not autonomy *from* the organism or its experiential functions; it is the self-sufficiency *of* those functions to become present to themselves.”

7. The assertiveness of consciousness.

“When the ability of consciousness to introduce opposition between itself and the object is thus envisioned, ... it reveals that, whenever an object of consciousness is experienced, the object is thereby asserted as being itself and as being whatever it is. From this coign of vantage, then, consciousness is definable as *assertive experience*.” An assertive experience is the recognition of the real by the experiencer and it does not involve any transfer of data from the object to the experiencer’s consciousness. An assertive experience is an act on the part of a conscious individual and “is a result of the experiencer being informed by the fact that he has been informed by the object itself.” In short, the experiencer has become conscious of an object.

When humans speak, they assert their experience in and through the uttering of audible sounds (words) that communicate what they have experienced both constructively and destructively. As Dewart notes: “We must, therefore, determine not only how consciousness operates

normally, but also why it can work defectively and how its defective functioning can interfere with human life.”

8. The potential of consciousness for self-misinterpretation.

Human understanding and reasoning are fallible as experience shows, but this cannot be the full explanation for misinterpretation. “For as we have seen, consciousness perceives itself immediately, prior to all reflexion and all reasoning; in this unique case, therefore, where the object to be understood is identical with the consciousness that understands it, understanding should be, if not infallible, at very least easily self-correcting.” Dewart thus accounts for self-misinterpretation by stating that “the self-presence of consciousness must be deemed to admit of variations in quality.” To overcome the deficiencies of self-misinterpretation one has to overcome the understanding of such dualism “that inclines us to misinterpret the duality as if it were constituted by (a) an *object* in reality, and (b) the same *object*, but in experience. That is, the act of experiencing is misconstrued as the creation of a mental equivalent of the original in reality, and consciousness is mistaken for the coincidence of two different contents: (a) the contents of reality in itself, which exist in reality, and (b) the contents of the experience, which exist in the mind as a repetition of reality.” From this perspective, Dewart philosophically rejects the repetition of reality in the mind, symbolically or in any other sense.

So ends this précis of Chapters One and Two of Leslie Dewart’s book. Chapter Three, “The nature of speech” leads into the section of his book entitled, “The Origin and Development of Human Nature.” There is an Epilogue, entitled “The evolutionary significance of the emergence of consciousness in variant forms” in which Dewart offers some interpretive conclusions to his unconventional philosophical investigations. My only comment is that they are significant for a 20th Century interpretive context appropriate to his time. However, to my mind, his evaluative philosophical approach, leading up to his conclusions becomes significant for 21st Century philosophers, making appropriate allowances and adaptations for the Internet, Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. These latter social media platforms cannot be ignored today by any serious phenomenological philosopher contemplating human nature.

Website: <https://site-1727391-1843-9198.mystrikingly.com/>