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Review

Daniel Martin Feige, *Die Natur des Menschen: Eine dialektische Anthropologie*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022. ISBN 978-3-518-29953-1 (pbk). Pp. 316. €22.

In his new book, Daniel Martin Feige pursues the ambitious undertaking of giving a dialectical account of human nature. To this end, the book states two goals: First, it argues that a philosophical answer to anthropological questions is irreducible, in contrast to empirical answers given by some natural sciences (11). Second, it critiques newer versions of philosophical anthropologies, as represented by Neo-Aristotelian or Neo-Kantian approaches (e.g. Michael Thompson and John McDowell) (12). In contrast to the latter, Feige defends his thesis, which he says can be found in Hegel and Adorno. In an early account he describes his thesis as follows: 'The human being is the living being that makes itself into what it has understood itself to be, and in doing so it always works itself off something that it cannot positively conceptualize.' (12—all translations here by JM)

The three chapters of the book are structured by Feige's understanding of dialectics. He describes dialectical thinking as a form of immanent critique. This means that we have to measure modes of thought by what they themselves hold to be true. Thus, if a position cannot provide for what it holds to be true by its own standards, it necessarily shows that it must be wrong (203). Immanent critique, then, is dialectical when it shows us an alternative for two opposing ways of thought about the same thing. The aim of dialectical thinking is to show that each of these opposing ways of thought is one-sided in order to open up a new perspective (205). Consequently, the first two chapters of his book are structured in order to resolve the opposition between two ways of thinking about human nature. The third chapter is intended to present the progressive alternative to the previously discussed positions.

The first chapter is devoted to the 'false alternative' (27) between 'reductive biological naturalism' (33) and 'historical relativism' (65). Both positions, although very different in their approach, fall into the same category of thinking: they undermine the role of reason as an irreducible aspect of human nature (80). 'Reductive biological naturalism' is identified here primarily with sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. These relativize reason as an essential human characteristic by singling out one empirical aspect (e.g., a single gene) that distinguishes us from other animals. Humans are thereby seen as animals among animals. Accordingly, human

action would thus be merely a more complex case of what animals do (41). In this picture, our actions and moral judgments are only the effects of evolutionary pressure. In order to think this, however, one has to presuppose that the reasons for this position are understood by us as the reasons they are. They must therefore presuppose a capacity that we have but cannot explain empirically (47). This capacity is reason itself. For Feige, reason is the ability that enables us to justify our thoughts and actions and, at the same time, understand these reasons as the reasons they are.

In contrast, 'historical relativism', identified here primarily with Michel Foucault, argues that our nature is essentially discursive. What we are as human beings is thus radically determined by historical and cultural forms of life. From this, the historical relativist concludes that we can describe historical instantiations of reason as an empirical object from the outside (68). Moreover, reason itself poses only as a *modern* description of the human being. Hence all definitions of the human being, and even the category of the human being itself, would be historically specific views, which as such are necessarily limited (77). Feige criticizes here again that any claim to knowledge implies that this claim itself is intelligible to us. But something can only be intelligible to us through reason. Therefore, the historical relativist must presuppose reason as the capacity to make any claims for knowledge at all (80).

Feige formulates a helpful and insightful critique of common attacks on reason as something which defines us as human beings. This critique, then, motivates the transition to the second chapter. Here he aims to better understand the irreducibility of reason. To this end, he devotes himself to a current debate in which there are two prominent positions on this. These two positions share one aspect: to understand reason as an irreducible aspect of the human being we cannot understand ourselves in an additive way. That is, we are not simply a mere combination of sensory and rational faculties. This statement would lead to the problems discussed in chapter one: Either we are an animal among animals, which would undermine reason as an essential aspect of our lives, or we are flawed angels, implying that our human standpoint as such is necessarily flawed. In contrast, the following positions assume that the presence of reason is *transformative*. This means that this faculty explains what it means for humans to have faculties in the first place (82).

But in light of his dialectical approach, Feige also shows that there is a false alternative in the debate between these two positions, which he titles 'first-nature-naturalism' and 'second-nature-naturalism'. Both share the idea that understanding human nature in a transformative way means that the difference between life forms is a logical one. However, their conception of this logical distinction differs.

'First-nature-naturalism' or 'Neo-Aristotelianism', most notably associated with Michael Thompson, assumes that the logical distinction between life forms is already expressed in their first nature (83). When we think about a life form

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or make judgments about it, we are already representing it in the light of what it means for it to be alive. Therefore, the specific activities that constitute the being alive of a life form are irreducible aspects of what it means to represent something as the living being it is (90). In the case of us as human beings, then, our first nature is given by the fact that we always represent ourselves in the first-person perspective. Therefore, Thompson argues, self-consciousness is an irreducible aspect of our life form. It is always already realized in every human being because it explains what it means for us to be alive (106). Although Feige agrees somewhat, he points out that this explanation lacks forms of development, which are also crucial aspects of our nature (99).

For this reason, Feige turns to 'second-nature-naturalism' or 'Neo-Kantianism', which he associates primarily with John McDowell. In contrast to Thompson's approach, McDowell argues that humans undergo a special form of development in the course of which they acquire a *second* nature. McDowell calls this development *Bildung*. Only in this second nature do we first exhibit the particular kind of rational activities that are constitutive of our lives as human beings (148). First nature, in this picture, is the side of nature described by the natural sciences, in which we are nothing more than mere animals (164).

Feige wants to emphasize this distinction between first and second nature. On the one hand, this distinction underlines the fact that we constitute ourselves through rational activities. On the other hand, it shows that what makes us human is not always already realized. Moreover, this kind of rational self-constitution allows us to critically step back from our nature and our thoughts and actions (148). However, Feige follows Thompson's point that we need to understand first nature in relation to the human being in a different way. If our first and second natures fall under two logically different forms of description (empirical and rational), their relation remains unclear.

To resolve the opposition between first and second nature naturalism, Feige argues that the distinction between first and second nature is a distinction *within* our reason itself. But this distinction is not one between rational and mere nature. In fact, we should understand it as the distinction between a rational understanding of ourselves and a moment of indeterminacy, or something those understandings do not encompass (171).

Eventually, the third chapter is the progressive part of the book. With Hegel and Adorno, Feige shows what it means that we are indeterminate beings. His central argument in this regard is that we do not merely determine the *content* of what constitutes our nature through acts of self-determination, as McDowell might think. In contrast, in these acts, we also change the *form* of our human nature itself (177). In order to understand this form-content dialectic, Feige argues, we need a concept of history as found in Hegel. In the book, this concept is called 'retroactive teleology' (222). In this sense, we make history through collective acts of

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self-determination in which we change or deepen the sense of what it means to be a rational being. This is described as a retroactive process because the outcome is always open-ended. Only in retrospect do we understand that we have made ourselves into whom we understood ourselves to be (246/47). Therefore, the retroactive nature of our self-understandings does not allow us to formally describe what it means to be a rational being (237). This is what Feige means by the indeterminacy of our form of life and which sets him apart from 'historic relativism': reason is the form of our life, but what that means is always constituted through collective acts of self-determination (247). Because we do not know in advance where these acts will lead, we are also always confronted with something that we cannot positively conceptualize—something that is always not realized or understood (250). According to Feige, this is the inherent negativity of our form of life, which allows us to critically include pathological social relations that are not positively integrated into our self-understanding (256).

The last part of Feiges' book summarizes his arguments and relates them to the approaches of Classical German Anthropology (e.g. Gehlen, Scheler, and Plessner) and in an outlook, he shortly discusses the relationship between human nature and art. There is no space to discuss these sections further but they point to the critique I want to make. I think that the strength of Feiges' book is also its weakness. On the one hand, it is very helpful that Feige takes the time to discuss and criticize positions that are mostly left out of recent discussions on human nature. On the other hand, this sometimes creates a somewhat unfocused or rushed impression, especially in the last part of the book. As a result, the main thesis of the book is not entirely convincing, although the approach itself is exciting and promising. It would have been helpful if Feige had used the last sections of his book to deepen his progressive thesis on human nature. However, he did not adequately clarify how the *form* of our life can be something that changes through its content. Especially applied to the logical form of self-consciousness this is hard to understand. In contrast, Thompson and McDowell still point out an important fact: The logical form of our self-consciousness is bound to the material concept that explains this form. This material concept is the concept of the human being. If the logic of self-consciousness was different, we would no longer speak of a human being but of another form of life. So if the form of earlier instantiations of self-consciousness in history were logically distinct from our self-consciousness, how could we still understand them as instantiations of the human life form?

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